A Midsummer Rose

Katharine Tynan

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A MIDSUMMER ROSE

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MRS. PRATT OF PARADISE FARM

(*With Frances Maitland*)

THE BOOK OF FLOWERS

(*Edited*)

CABINET OF IRISH LITERATURE
IRISH LOVE SONGS

A MIDSUMMER ROSE

BY

KATHARINE TYNAN

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A MIDSUMMER ROSE

CHAPTER I

RALPH BRETHERTON stood on the hearthrug before a blazing morning fire in his chambers in Lincoln's Inn and stared discontentedly at his own reflection in the Adams' glass upon the chimney-piece. The glass reflected a head which had a certain impressiveness. A head no longer of a man in his first or even middle youth—he was thirty-six—it was singularly well-shaped ; and the grizzling of the dark hair about the temples detracted nothing from its dignity. He had a not uncommon English face, somewhat lean and lantern-jawed ; clean-shaven ; the nose long, yet just escaping the length which stands for stupidity and with a fineness of nostril suggestive of passion ; fine eyes with a certain something of unworldliness, of idealism, the eyes of Don Quixote, so that the face, which had set out to be dry and acute a legal face, had failed of its first intention ; a

mouth that might have been thin but had fallen short of it, else the face would have been less attractive; the something of humour which lurked about the corners of the mouth doubtless made Mr. Bretherton less intolerant of his fellows than he might have been otherwise.

It was the little season between Christmas and Easter, when a certain number of people may be found in town ready to receive their friends and to give them an individual attention not to be looked for later on. Ralph Bretherton had a quantity of cards on his chimney-piece—for the opening of the International and various winter picture-shows, for soirées and meetings of this and that learned society, for dinners and At Homes. But the social engagements which interested him most just at present were offered to him through little scented notes, of which a good many lay on his writing-table. Some of them were gaily reproachful. Why had not Mr. Bretherton found out that this lady or that lady was in town? Would he come for lunch on such a day and as much of the afternoon as he could spare? Or it might be a little dinner-party of four or six or eight, all congenial souls.

Ralph Bretherton liked these demands very well. It was not in him to resist the charm of a charming woman, even if something stood

apart and smiled a little while three-fourths of the man gave himself up to be well-pleased. He liked to sit in a pretty room after a good lunch, to be petted and made much of by a charming woman. He had a great many women-friends. For the last five years he had been a detrimental, ever since Edward Harding, his old cousin, had committed the incredible folly of his marriage; a safe detrimental. Mothers with pretty daughters had known that they could trust him. Perhaps it was not altogether to his credit. He had no great love for the immature though he felt the appeal of youth; and he was a sort of bachelor uncle to a great many golden lads and lasses from one year old up to twenty. He used to say that he liked the mothers best. Opinion was divided as to whether he was selfish and cold-hearted, or only wise in avoiding what was obviously not for him. He was a *dilettante* at thirty-five; his interests, his occupations of the unprofitable order. The golden girls, once they had come to marriageable age, were not for him. He had been calling himself a fogy any time these last half-dozen years.

Occasionally there had been threatenings of trouble with one or other of the golden girls who had been accustomed to run about, to ride and walk and see things in Mr. Bretherton's

company. He had an appeal for younger as well as elder women. He had always behaved beautifully, according to the mothers, had known just the point at which to begin to detach the girlish affections from him, doing it so gently that there was as little hurt as might be consistent with success. Presently, when Nora or Violet or Evelyn was married, Ralph Bretherton would come back to be the family friend. He behaved beautifully. Whether his beautiful behaviour had cost him much or little no one could tell. One or two of the cleverest of the charming women had discovered, but only the cleverest, that while Ralph knew a good deal about them they knew very little about Ralph, frank as he seemed to be.

He seemed very well contented with his life, although he might well have been discontented, for, during the years when he ought to have been making for himself a place in the world he had been at the beck and call of Edward Harding, whose heir he was supposed to be. The heir of Littlecombe need be at no loss for an occupation. He had been called to the Bar, but he had never practised. At the time he had been called it had been something to give him a name and a place beyond his heirship of the old cousin's property. He seldom

allowed himself to be bitter. He had become something of a philosopher and he was aware that bitterness poisoned life, that it was at the root of indigestion, premature wrinkles, and all manner of unpleasant things. But there was a little drop of gall somewhere in his life, though he refused to stir it up, because he had lost the chance of being a practising barrister. At thirty he had found it so difficult to re-adjust the point of view of life that the difficulty had proved insuperable. He ought to have begun at twenty ; thirty was altogether too late. And when his cousin's marriage had turned him out-of-doors—or rather his own bitter resentment of it, for Edward Harding had been minded to do the handsome thing by his young cousin—he was a pauper, according to the standards he had grown up with. When a seasonable legacy a year later had lifted him into a position of ease for a bachelor, it was too late to begin the arduous road which climbs up to success at the Bar. He had a certain contempt for himself because he had not chucked the life he was leading and gone out into the wilderness of hard work as some of his best friends in the profession had urged.

During the rare moments when the bitterness came in sight and was handled and surveyed before being laid away again, Ralph Bretherton

was angrily contemptuous of himself—that he, with a sound body hard with exercise, should have come to this, to shooting other men's game and sitting at other men's tables, to hanging after pretty women, to taking up this and that pursuit, not one seriously enough to make him of any account. At such times he would sigh after the hard up-hill climb which other men had described for him, with the passion of the climber for the sheer peak and the death that awaited one false step. He would look at his hands hard with rowing and cricketing, with all manner of sports, and anathematize them. He could have borne with himself better if the eye had been less bright that looked back at him from the glass, his nerve less excellent, his pulses less cool and steady. He was only fit physically, he said to himself this morning of December, while he waited for the excellent breakfast which Dixon, his man-of-all-work, would presently place on the white cloth; mentally he was not fit—he was a shirker, a slacker, a no-account man. When he dropped out it would not matter seriously to one creature under Heaven.

However, this morning the discontent was not due to introspection. It was due to something which had stirred up the old grief and disgrace of his cousin's marriage; for Ralph

Bretherton, when he resented the marriage so furiously that he flung back in his cousin's face the handsome offer he had made of a provision for him, was inflamed by more than a common anger because he was cheated out of his inheritance of Littlecombe and its broad acres. Family pride was at the root of his anger. He had not been able to forgive. Now that the morning's post had brought him the news of his cousin's death, something of the old tenderness there had been between them had wakened again. It added a poignant element to the dissatisfaction he felt because the old anger and pain, which he had put behind him as he thought for ever, must be raked up again.

Dixon was rather late with breakfast. It would not be long delayed now. He could hear the sizzling of rashers over the kitchen fire, and the appetizing odour of the fried bacon came to his nostrils through the door, which was slightly ajar.

He looked towards the window, the twelve small panes of which were filled in with grey sky. A few icy snow-flakes drifted against the panes and congealed there. Not a very good day for the three hours' journey into Worcestershire. But he supposed he must go. He could catch the eleven o'clock express for Birmingham at Paddington and would get to

Nunsholme, the station for Littlecombe House, about a quarter to two. He could lunch at the inn. He had an angry feeling that he would not be beholden to his cousin's widow for so much hospitality. He could secure a bed at the "Good King Henry" too. If it was anything like what he remembered it, if the inn was still in the old hands, it would be a clean and comfortable bed.

He sighed irritably as he took up Mrs. Harding's letter and read it again, holding it at arm's length as though it were something he did not care to touch too closely. He drew the letter from its envelope. The paper was of a silky-white texture, faintly lined—not scented; he thanked Heaven for that. He would have expected to find it redolent of musk.

"Littlecombe-by-Nunsholme,
"Worcestershire."

The address was not even printed. It was written in a large, straggling writing, which had an air as though the writer found penmanship somewhat difficult; but the up-and-down strokes were firm.

"Mr. Ralph Bretherton,

"Dear Sir,

"I have to inform you that my dear husband is no more. He breathed his last at

4 o'clock of yesterday afternoon, December 9th. It was his wish that you should be asked to attend his funeral and to stay for the reading of the will. I desire to say that there will be a bedroom here ready for you, and that I hope you will accept the hospetality of Littlecombe for so long as you will stay.

"Your obedient

"LIZZIE HARDING."

He snorted over the "is no more" and "breathed his last," holding the simple letter away from him. "Hospetality" too. He was quite well aware that correct spelling is but an arbitrary thing after all. Yet at the moment the little lapse, coinciding as it did with his preconceived notions of his cousin's widow, was fuel to his fires.

He put the letter away as Dixon came into the room, bearing a tray with silver-covered dishes upon it, and began setting each in its place upon the white table-cloth.

"I shall want a portmanteau packed directly after breakfast," his master said. "My black clothes, please: Mr. Harding is dead. I am going into Worcestershire to attend his funeral. I shall not be back till to-morrow night."

"Yes, sir. Very sorry, sir, for the Squire."

Dixon had been with Ralph Bretherton

these ten years back. He had been under notice to leave during that interval between Edward Harding's marriage and the opportune legacy. He came from Worcestershire—from the neighbourhood of Littlecombe.

"Yes, sir." For a moment the trained servant strove hard with the natural man; then the natural man was uppermost. "I beg your pardon, sir. The Squire was always good to the people."

Ralph Bretherton answered not a word. For the matter of that he was confoundedly sorry himself, though he would not acknowledge it. The memory of Edward Harding, incredibly youthful at seventy years old, his eyes bright, his cheeks rosy, with what only those in his inner confidence knew to be the brightness and the colour of pain. An irresistibly charming old man, with courage, with dignity, intellectual, human, a past-master in the neglected art of manners. So generous, so sympathetic. Ralph Bretherton had been devoted to him. When he married the daughter of one of his tenants, who had become a sort of nurse to him, an element in Bretherton's rage had been because it was Edward Harding who had done this thing. If a lesser man had done it it would have been no such matter.

And here was Dixon talking about his sorrow. In the jarring and fretting of Ralph Bretherton's usually tolerant mind it annoyed him that Dixon should have expressed his sorrow.

He ate his breakfast in the same mood of irritation. By the time breakfast was over his portmanteau was packed. He had smoked his after-breakfast pipe before the hansom was at the door.

He was seated in the hansom, on his way to Paddington, when he remembered suddenly that he had promised to go to tea with Rose Bourne that afternoon. There would be time to send a telegram to her from Paddington. He was not sure that he regretted not going to tea with Rose. People had no right to return like ghosts from the dead, springing up to remind a man how far behind him was his seventeenth year—like Rose yesterday. Rose—it seemed ridiculous to call her Rose, to associate her with that radiant Rose of long ago, about whom he had been mad in his boyhood, who had played with him and teased him and petted him, finally had married Cuthbert Bourne, a Senior Wrangler of his year, and gone out to India with him. She had sprung up suddenly at a London crossing, middle-aged, tints that ought to have been

ruddy and wholesome, yellowed by Indian suns and heats, a fine network of lines at the corners of eyes which refused to be anything but blue, the wind in her hair. By her side was a girl who was most impertinently like what her mother must have been at her age, only shy as he had never known Rose to be, for when she had played with him she was twenty-five and had not been shy for the love-sick boy of seventeen.

On the whole, he thought he was relieved at missing Rose—Mrs. Bourne. She had no business to come back like that. She was, he conjectured from her rather shabby widow's weeds, left badly off; and the address she had given him—somewhere Holloway way—suggested dreary things. He hoped Rose would let it be off altogether. When things were done with they had better be done with. It was absurd of her to have recognized him. He would never have recognized her, broadened out, yellowed over her natural roses, middle-aged. The wind that had lifted her dusty hair had had a ghostly reminder of the way the wind used to play with her curls long ago. Hers had been the naturally curling hair with which the wind plays as though it loved it.

There was another vexation in the thought

of Rose Bourne. He did not like her to come back like that, making him suddenly dreary and middle-aged. However else he had thought of himself, he had never thought of his being middle-aged.

And there was that shy, radiant figure of youth lurking in Rose's ample shadow to remind him of what Rose had been. The same rose-and-white complexion; a touch of carmine in the cheeks and lips; the same cloudy, chestnut hair, masses of it, knotted negligently at the back of a small head. The girl's eyes were strikingly blue, bluer even than Rose's had been. And they had looked at him shyly before they hid themselves under the sweeping golden lashes.

Poor child! He wondered what Rose was doing with the child. What had happened to bring them down in the world? Cuthbert Bourne had been a steady, careful fellow, without apparently a vice in the world—given over to his books. He had seemed a bloodless lover for pretty Rose to the jealous boy of long ago.

And the girl's name—Avis. It suited her. A queer name, but there was a certain bird-like suggestion in the way she carried her head, the small head rising upon the slender neck.

A verse came into his mind, and he hummed it to a tune of his own—

> "Oh, sweet it was in Avis
> To catch the landward breeze."

Ridiculous! It had nothing to do with the girl's name, that excellent imitation of a chanty made by a comfortable parson at home in England.

At Paddington he gave his luggage to a porter. There was plenty of time. He strolled leisurely to the telegraph-office, took a form and filled it.

"To Mrs. Bourne,
"27, Salamanca Road,
"Holloway, N.

"Unavoidably prevented keeping engagement. Must go out of town for a few days. May I come when I get back?

"BRETHERTON."

When it had gone he wondered why he had suggested another meeting. Rose might have been content to let the thing drop. Perhaps not. She had seemed uncommonly glad to see him. Poor Rose! After all, one ought not to desert an old friend who, plainly, has fallen on evil days. He was glad after all that he had said that about coming to see them when he should return to town.

CHAPTER II

ARRIVED at Nunsholme, he found the carrriage and pair from Littlecombe awaiting him. A face he remembered was on the box—old Jeffcott's; there was a young groom whom he did not remember to have seen before.

The station-master was the same; and Bill Gales the porter touched his cap to him with a properly subdued grin of welcome as though he had gone away only yesterday. To be sure, in these quiet country places things did not alter as they did in busier centres. He had a sense of amazement because the thing which had pulled down his life had seemed to make so little difference here.

He spoke to the station-master.

"How are you, Raymond? I hope Mrs. Raymond and the children are quite well?"

He felt a fear of saying it, as though Mrs. Raymond might be dead and the children grown up and gone away. Yet Raymond did not look a day older; neither did Bill Gales, nor the shaggy terrier that trotted at his heels. After all, it was only five years.

He was reminded of it by the station-master's placid answer.

"All quite well, thank you, sir. We're seven now, and the elder ones going to school. Mrs. Raymond will be glad to see you, sir. We're all glad to see you back, though sorry for the occasion. The poor Squire! It was quite sudden at the last."

Bretherton returned the friendly greetings kindly and strode out to the carriage which was in waiting. He was annoyed that it had been sent. Mrs. Harding need not have taken it for granted that he would come. She had sent to meet the one possible train of the day at Nunsholme. He had not wanted nor desired to accept the widow's hospitality. The "Good King Henry" would have pleased him better. He dreaded Littlecombe under its changed conditions.

Yet so far there was no evidence of change. He stood a moment speaking to old Jeffcott while the groom saw to the luggage.

"Well, Jeffcott," he said, "I'm glad to see you looking so well. These are sad changes."

"Indeed they be," said the old fellow, beaming down at him from the box. "Yet the master lived to a ripe age. Seventy-five he were, sir, yet often he's told me that he were

prophesied churchyard clay from the hour he were born. I hope you've come to stay a bit, Mr. Ralph."

"For the funeral, Jeffcott."

The old fellow's face clouded over.

"We thought as you might be comin' back for good, me an' the missus," he said. "Meanin' no offence, sir, I'm sure."

Again Ralph Bretherton had the sense of irritation. How simple they were, these people! Did they think he was coming back to take up his residence at Littlecombe under the same roof as his cousin's widow? His eyes roamed over the sleek sides of the bays. They were shining as he remembered them; the silver on the harness winked in the cold white light of the December day. The carriage and pair had that inexpressible sense of leisure, of luxury, of rank, which the motor-car lacks so singularly. Everything was as he remembered it, except for the absence of the eager, flushed face of the young-old man, bent forward to welcome him tenderly and graciously when he came in the old days. The absence caused a pang. Plainly there had been no cataclysm at Littlecombe because the Squire had married a peasant and the rightful heir had been cast out.

As they drove along over the clean, frosty

roads—by oaken coppices which had not yet shaken down all their leaves, by woods in their winter sleep, by village greens with old houses standing around them, from which came ancient bodies at the sound of the carriage-wheels to catch a glimpse of the Littlecombe carriage as it went by—Ralph Bretherton's old love for the place awakened, and with it a new, poignant sense of loss. The country was very still. No sign of life in the fields except for the ploughman and his horses cutting straight furrows in the purple earth. The sun had come from behind the clouds and made a silver haze between the road they were traversing and the distant Malvern hills, which rose up mirage-like from a plain of mimic sea. Now and again they passed a long black-and-white house steeply roofed, or a group of cottages clustered about a church. The colouring was yet autumn's, the roads yet carpeted with the drift of leaves. The old feeling for the place stirred in Bretherton's heart, making him desolate with a sense of loss. Littlecombe had been his paradise during childhood and boyhood. He had been used to think of it as his, the grey, beautiful house set in the lovely, fruitful country. Some day he had looked to bring his bride there, and in time their children should gather about them,

finding Littlecombe more dear and homelike than it had been to their father.

It was as though the walls of Gaza had toppled upon him when he had heard of his cousin's marriage. Edward Harding had announced it himself, in the elegant handwriting, wonderfully clear and firm for a man of his age. The tone had been apologetic, yet not ashamed. It would seem to the unthinking world a folly in a man of his age, he wrote; he trusted to his dear boy to understand something at least of the reasons for the marriage. Meanwhile Ralph might rest assured that it would not make any difference to him. Lizzie was the soul of unselfish generosity and high-mindedness. If Ralph knew everything he would applaud the marriage. . . .

There was more of the same kind. He remembered how he had tossed the letter aside with a bitter laugh. In such terms had fools excused their folly since the world began. He knew what to think of the woman who had married a septuagenarian in the bloom of her youth, who had betrayed her position of trust and befooled an old patient, soft as wax in her hands. As for its being the same, he knew how much to believe of that too. The peasant woman would fill Littlecombe with her children. It was so likely that Edward would put her and them aside for a mere cousin.

He had not waited to see. He had simply washed his hands of Littlecombe and Edward Harding, so proving himself Don Quixote. After all, Lizzie Harding had not given her old husband children. The way was as open as it had ever been, so far as a direct heirship was concerned; but, doubtless, Mrs. Harding would have secured all the spoils for which she had sold herself. She would marry again, a man of her own class. For five years now Edward Harding had been entirely under her influence. Of course, he had done all she wanted him to do.

Another impatient sigh broke from the lips of the man who was being carried along the woodland road in the Littlecombe carriage. He remembered his boyish devotion to Edward Harding long ago. That and Littlecombe had helped him through his tight places—through his affair with Rose, for example. He had deserved a better fate, the kind, fine, bright old spirit which, in his knowledge, had never known the slackening of age—Edward Harding's sickliness and frailty had seemed in his case the golden philtre to keep the heart young—he had deserved a better fate than to marry a designing hussy, to bring disgrace upon Littlecombe in his old age.

Again he fumed that she had sent the carriage

on the chance of his coming by this train. He had not felt equal to refusing the Littlecombe carriage in the sight of the old friends who had known him when he was a boy at Eton, and earlier. He wished now that he had said he would walk. It was only five miles, and a beautiful frosty day—ideal for walking. He wished he was his own man, on his own feet, and not in the Littlecombe carriage, presenting an appearance of enviable luxury to the one or two tramping fellows who stood to gape at the carriage as it went by.

He began to look out for the "Good King Henry." Ah! there was the old place at last, a black-and-white front of three gables, one standing back from the others. It faced him, standing where three roads met, overhung by the trees of Littlecombe park, the park behind it, with a vista of fallow deer feeding in the glade.

Putting his head out of the carriage he called to Jeffcott to stop at the "Good King Henry." It was a sudden impulse. He did not know exactly what he was going to say when Mrs. Varley, if she was still alive, should present herself. He could hardly ask for a lodging, with his baggage gone on to Littlecombe. Perhaps, if he could stand it, he would put up a night—to-morrow night, when the

funeral was over—at the "Good King Henry," for old time's sake. He had writing materials in his bag. He could go on with that article of his on the ancient drinking-vessels of the Egyptians for the *Dryasdust Review*—unless he was jarred beyond the ability to abstract himself in work of the kind.

As the carriage drew up in front of the inn he got out with a certain eagerness and told Jeffcott to drive on. He was tired sitting, and would walk the rest of the way. He did not glance at the old coachman's dissatisfied face, but went quickly into the low brown passage which led to the interior of the inn.

Some one came to meet him from one of the brown parlours, of which there was a network behind the passage — not Mrs. Varley — a younger woman, who greeted him as Mr. Ralph with a sly, flattering air. He had no memory of her, and asked for Mrs. Varley.

"Please sit down, Mr. Ralph," the woman said, inviting him within the parlour and setting him a chair. "There, I knew you'd come. 'Twas only last night they was talking about it in the bar—old John Hodges—you remember John, Mr. Ralph, he used to be postman—and William Spratt, the carpenter, and a few more. Some said as you'd come, and some as you wouldn't. I said as you'd come."

This frank revelation of his interest for the old neighbours annoyed Ralph Bretherton. Surely he was in a fretful mood, different from his usual equability of temper.

"Where is Mrs. Varley?" he asked shortly.

"Oh, poor Aunt Esther. I forgot you'd been away these five years, Mr. Ralph. Sad changes there are indeed, sir. And the poor Squire gone as well as Aunt Esther. She died in the cold winter three years ago. I don't think you remember me, sir. I'm her niece, Ellen Hackett. I was under-housemaid at the hall before the Squire married again."

He had a hazy recollection of her, a girl with pink rims round her eyes, a soft voice, a deprecating manner, a sly look. As a boy, he had disliked her.

"Oh, and you are now owner of the inn? I'm sorry for my old friend Mrs. Varley. I hadn't heard."

"Of course you hadn't, sir." Curiosity looked at him from between the lids, a little pinker than of old. The woman was not uncomely—a certain faded prettiness she had, apart from the weak eyes with their discoloured lids. Thin wisps of fair hair fell about her ears. "Of course things are very different from what they used to be at Littlecombe. We've felt for you—we have indeed,

Mr. Ralph. And the poor old Squire. 'Twas hard on him in his old age, so it was, to be left to them there Mortons. Over-running the Hall they were, sir. A common lot of gipsies. Why, the head-gamekeeper's her own first cousin. 'Tisn't what I call decent, sir. And of course the gentry wouldn't have nothink to do with *'er*." She forgot her aspirates, probably acquired with pains, in the stress she laid on the last word. That "*'er*" seemed to contain the concentrated bitterness of a million asps. "You'll have a glass of wine, Mr. Ralph? My word! it's good to see you again at the 'Good King Henry.' Why, if things had been as they ought to, you'd be my landlord, sir, wouldn't you? Now, like as not, it'll be Harry Sprague, the head-gamekeeper, sir. Of course you wouldn't know anything about it. There was a deal of talk when *she* brought him to the 'All."

Again a dropped aspirate. It was as though she saw the gathering cloud on Ralph Bretherton's face and hurried on with desperate haste to spill as much poison as was possible before the cloud should break upon her head.

"You see, sir, we all feel for the old family," she panted on, "having lived under it so long; and we can't abide common upstarts being

brought in to take the places of them as did ought to be there."

"Ah, I didn't come in to discuss my family affairs, Miss . . . Miss—ah, thank you,—Hackett." His tone was freezing. "I hoped my old friend, Mrs. Varley, was still hale and well. I am very sorry not to find her. Good morning."

He stalked out of the inn in a furious rage, loathing the woman, but bitter also against those who had so dragged the family honour in the dust that it was possible for her to have said and suggested the things she did. He did not ask himself if he believed them. There had been something oddly foul in her manner which conveyed more than she said. He knew her type—one of the neurotic, evil-minded sort. He tried to put her and her sayings out of his mind as he stalked along between the winter hedges, the keen frosty air in his face which he could have enjoyed if he could only have got away from the disturbance of the woman and her poison. It was not so easy a thing to do.

Near the park gates he found the carriage waiting for him. Old Jeffcott, his face rising rosy as a frosty sunset out of his fur cape, looked at him with something of reproof in his gaze as though he were ten years old.

"I thought I'd wait for you, Mr. Ralph," he said, "though you didn't give me time to say so when you jumped out at the 'King Henry.' Likely as not you didn't know wot changes had took place. 'Tain't wot it was in Mrs. Varley's time. That woman's tongue 'ud put any man off his beer."

"Ah, thank you, Jeffcott," Ralph said, his hand on the carriage door.

"You'll excuse the liberty I took in waiting without orders," Jeffcott apologized. "It didn't seem right, to me, sir, as you should come on foot, not now, sir. I hope that woman didn't bother you, sir. Mrs. Harding dismissed her the year after she were married; and well-deserved too. When women are good they're very good, sir, as I often say to my old woman; but when they're bad they're pison."

Bretherton smiled—for the first time since he had found the Littlecombe carriage waiting for him at Nunsholme station.

"I am very glad you waited, Jeffcott," he said. He wondered if the old coachman's mind had got at the subtlety of feeling that the arrival of the empty carriage which had been sent for him at Littlecombe might suggest a slight to his uncle's widow. It might have been thought that he had refused the carriage, preferring to walk. Well, it was not the

moment to slight her, whatever she might be. He was glad Jeffcott had been more thoughtful than he and prevented it.

They entered the park, not by the principal gates which were a mile further on, but by a road that led through the woods, twisting and turning and affording all manner of delightful glimpses of woodland scenery.

At a turn of the road they came upon a delightful picturesque cottage, which in the old days had belonged to the head-gamekeeper. He glanced that way half-unwillingly. So old Brett was dead or superannuated. Time too. He had been too old for his work; and there had been too few pheasants in the time Bretherton remembered. He had noticed many pheasants as he drove by the woodland road, strutting about in the glades of the wood or flying with a scream before the approach of the carriage. There had been no shooting this year, he supposed. In other years Edward Harding had been punctilious over the house-parties at Littlecombe for the pheasant-shooting, even though he had to accompany them on his good days in a kind of bath-chair drawn by a very trustworthy pony.

As the carriage passed swiftly by the cottage, covered now with the last splendours of the autumn foliage that would fall thickly after

this frost, he caught a glimpse of a young, dark-faced man who was bending over his dogs, feeding them or fondling. He straightened himself as the carriage passed, and stared hard in its direction. From the passing glimpse Bretherton thought him to be more than usually well-endowed with good looks. Standing up straight in his shirt-sleeves the man showed picturesque and well-built. Ill-tempered too, or was it imagination that made Bretherton think he scowled?

CHAPTER III

He had been wondering uneasily how he should meet Mrs. Harding; what she would look like; what they should say to each other.

His uneasiness was unnecessary, for she did not appear at all. Instead there was the unwelcome face of Freddy Vernon, who had been in the same form with him at Eton, and was the son of the senior partner in Vernon and Hayes, the old-established firm of solicitors who had always done Mr. Harding's legal business. It was a bit of a set-back when he had been nerving herself to meet the widow, to be brought up against Freddy Vernon, changed very little from the fat, dark boy in the Etons and white collar, solemnly dressed in blacks which had an undertakerish effect. He had always detested Vernon at school, and had not liked him better at their occasional meetings in later life.

"How do you do, Bretherton," Mr. Vernon said, holding out a soft and damp hand. "I am sorry we meet on so sad an occasion."

Confound Vernon! What an undertaker he

would have made, to be sure! Detestation of Vernon's overdone professional manner made him brutal.

"After all—considering my cousin was a sick man, he has had a long run. Seventy-five is a good age."

"Too good, to the mind of the heir occasionally," Vernon responded, with a quick change to facetiousness which Bretherton found more annoying than his former manner.

"Mrs. Harding is quite well, I hope?" Ralph said, with a glance towards the door as though he expected some one to enter by it.

"No use, my dear fellow," smiled Mr. Vernon. "The widow will not see you at present. She has, in fact, asked me to do the honours. After the funeral to-morrow we may be better able to face our world. Naturally—in my position I am aware of such things—the relations were not friendly. I dare say we find it a bit of a trial to meet you."

Was there ever so detestable a manner as Vernon's? Bretherton sighed for the old Eton days when he might have kicked him. He turned away coldly from Vernon's chuckle and smile. Old Bastable, the butler, who might have been a family solicitor so dignified was his aspect, came into the room with a tray. His face, despite the impassivity of the trained

servant, bore evidences of grief. A watery smile broke over it as he met Bretherton's eyes.

"Mrs. Harding asked me to say, sir, that lunch will be on the table at 1.30. She hopes you gentlemen will excuse her not appearing."

"Certainly, Bastable, certainly," said Freddy Vernon. "I have already made Mrs. Harding's excuses. We quite understand."

A trivial, passing wonder came into Bretherton's mind that Bastable should have stayed on at Littlecombe under the new mistress; but he supposed, at his age, the old fellow found uprooting too difficult a matter.

He left Mr. Vernon sniffing at the cigars which were on the table with whisky and a syphon of soda, and followed Bastable out of the room.

"Where is he, Bastable?" he asked in a half-whisper; and somewhat to his surprise his voice broke. He had said a good many harsh things about Edward Harding during these last five years—in his own mind; he was not one to wash the family linen in public. But now waves of tenderness were breaking over his heart for the dead man who had been so good to him in his youth and young manhood—for whom his boyhood had had an idealizing affection.

"The old room?" he asked.

Bastable nodded, and blinked. He seemed as though he might have said something but Bretherton did not wait. He went up the wide carpeted flight of stairs from the hall; past the alcove at the stair-head with its few excellent pieces of statuary against a background of tapestry; up a shorter flight of stairs; along a corridor lined with low, glass-fronted cases which contained the dead man's renowned collection of Bow and Chelsea china.

The house had a more clean and ordered look than he remembered. He had a fanciful theory that a house gives you warning at its threshold of the character of its owners. Well, Littlecombe had lifted itself clear of the disgrace. The atmosphere of the house was that of a country winter morning; it had an austere and clear freshness. Somewhere down in the depths of it a canary sang shrilly; through an open window of the corridor the songs of the robins came sweetly.

An old collie lifted himself heavily from the mat at the door which led to the suite of rooms that had been Edward Harding's own. He came quietly and rubbed himself against Bretherton's legs. He had not forgotten him, old Bruce. Bretherton stooped down and patted the dog's head, and looked into the

depths of his mournful eyes. Then he passed on into the room, closing the door behind him.

He had looked to find the dead left alone after the sad manner of Protestant countries. But there was some one there, some one kneeling on a prie-dieu near the dead man's head. The widow. He had hardly time to realize that she was there before she was gone. The room was dim; there was candle-light in it. At the head of the bed on which the dead man lay was suspended a great crucifix. Edward Harding had been an advanced High Churchman. It explained to some extent the departure from the frozen English ways.

Poor woman! he was sorry he had disturbed her. She had glided past him so quickly that he had hardly any impression of her. A glimpse by the candle-light of a cheek pale and yet warm, a head carried well on a long neck, heavy dark hair curtaining an ample forehead. It was not the Blowsabella he had expected.

He stood by the bed looking down at the face of the dead man. Edward Harding had always looked incredibly young in Bretherton's memory of him. The high colour, the bright eyes, the perpetual, quicksilver animation had sufficed to disguise, or almost to disguise, the weariness behind them. Now they were gone;

and the face looked very old and very tired. Looking down at it Bretherton's eyes were dim. He remembered with a heart-pang how he had refused his cousin's overtures.

> "I would we were boys as of old,
> In the field, by the fold,
> His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn,
> Were so easily borne."

His heart made excuses for the old man in this softened mood. Here was a sick man denied all his life the love of woman, the joy of children. Or was it that he had denied himself by some strange, lofty ordinance? Bretherton remembered the charm of the man, irresistible charm, the positive beauty of his looks which that deadly thing—middle-age—had never withered. What he must have been as a young man, with his gentle poetic nature added to his personal charm! There must have been women to love him for himself, without Littlecombe and its broad acres added. Only in his old age his self-repression had broken down; and how harshly he, Bretherton, had judged him! How he had turned from his overtures and cut the ties of old affection between them!

He wished now he had listened to what the dead man had had to say in his own extenuation. There had been something unsaid,

between the lines, of the letter in which he announced his marriage—something that now would never be said.

He looked into the quiet face and had a fancy that something lurked unspoken, a secret about the lips. He stooped and whispered in the unhearing ear—then stood upright, shy, though he was alone, of the fancifulness of the thing he had done. He was as impatient of emotion as most Englishmen.

Accustomed now to the dim room, he looked about him. Everything was neat and ordered. All traces of a sick-room had been put out of sight. There were flowers everywhere. He looked up at the crucifix with its high uplifting of pain and death to the very heights of Heaven. Religion was not much more than a formality in his own life, although in his secret heart he believed. Now he said to himself that it was better, a thousand times better, this death-chamber than the cold loneliness and isolation which English custom gives to the dead. He supposed the poor fellow had wished it so. It was not likely that Mrs. Harding would have done anything so foreign to insular habits.

He had to sit through lunch and dinner with Freddy Vernon. During the hours of the afternoon he avoided him, going out with old

Bruce, whom he could hardly detach from his place by his master's door, for a long ramble through country lanes, coming home by moonlight. He had turned back sooner than he wished, discovering by the dog's lagging behind that he was footsore; apparently he had not walked much of late, and the flints had cut the soft pads.

Coming in, he asked for some warm water and himself bathed the dog's paws. Freddy Vernon came out into the hall and watched him with an amused expression.

"Why not let a stable-boy do it, Bretherton?" he asked.

"Ah, well, you see, it happened in my company," Bretherton answered without looking up.

The walk had made him less intolerant of Freddy Vernon, or perhaps it was the strange peace of the house.

They got through the evening better than he had anticipated, with a little desultory talk and reading. Freddy Vernon suggested a quiet game of billiards behind closed doors; but he negatived it, lest in the circumstances the household should suspect a slight to the dead man's memory or to his widow. After all, they found unexpected things in common. Old Bruce came and scratched at the door and

was let in. He settled himself with a sigh on the hearthrug, resting his head on Bretherton's feet. It reminded Freddy Vernon of a curious experience in a country-house where he had been staying. A dog, invisible, had come into the room, dropped on the hearthrug with a sigh ; had got up and followed the host as he went out of the room ; had stirred under the table in the dining-room. "Only old Boxer, who died last year," said the host, easily.

Of such impersonal things they talked. Bretherton thought better of Freddy Vernon that he abstained from topics which were in both their minds. The quiet restfulness of the old house seemed to fold in about them with lamplight and firelight. There was not a sound to be heard. Outside the night was very still. Movements sounded hardly at all, with the thick carpets to deaden sound. Old Bastable, waiting on the two gentlemen at dinner, coming in and out of the library afterwards to replenish the fire, to attend to their wants, passed with noiseless feet.

Bretherton lay back in his chair, his eyes half closed, smoking a cigar while he listened to Vernon's prattle. There was a sense of homecoming about his being here, even though it was a house of death.

He said to himself that his London life was

a poor sort of thing; all very fine while a man was young. It was a dreary thing to be an elderly butterfly with no shelter against the winter of life. He stayed about in country-houses a good deal and was accustomed to luxury of living. Dixon did him very well as a rule, as well as any bachelor needed. Yet—he had missed for a long time the sensation of being at home which had come upon him since his return to Littlecombe.

In the mood of dreamy quiet he went to bed, up through the silent house where the lights lingered, but there was no other sign of life. Passing his cousin's door he had a rude shock. A couple of men came out, undertaker's men, with Bastable in attendance. They stood aside to let him pass. He understood. They had brought the coffin. It jarred him rudely after his impression of the death-chamber as a place peaceful and holy—a spiritual ante-chamber to a Presence.

A storm sprang up in the night; and it was wet and windy when the funeral started. A good many of the neighbouring gentry had sent carriages; but there was no funeral cortège, no hearse. The coffin was carried on the shoulders of some of the tenantry. A crowd of people walked with bent heads behind it. The sun came out in a watery gleam as they tramped

steadily along the wet roads in which the night's rain had torn watercourses.

Bretherton and Vernon walked behind the coffin. The old dog walked with them, shambling along with a depressed air. There was no sign of the widow, and Bretherton supposed she had remained at home. But she was by the grave-side, her face hidden by a veil. It struck him oddly that she did not wear the conventional widow's dress. A simple dress of dull, soft black; no crape; a small, tight-fitting bonnet. He looked curiously at her, but he could not penetrate the disguise of the veil. He saw that her figure was young, with a certain gipsy grace, something of the Orient, and he remembered to have heard that she had gipsy blood. He noticed that her neck was smooth and long between the dusky hair and the black gown. Her head was bent. No one spoke to her or offered her consolation. Watching her closely when the first clay rattled on the coffin-lid, Bretherton thought he detected a tremor of her body. But she was very still. When the grave was filled in she turned about with the same quietness of movement and went away down the churchyard-path to the stile by which one reached a field-path that came out near the front gates of Littlecombe.

After stopping to say a word to the officiating

clergyman, Bretherton took the field-path just in time to see the black-clad figure enter a copse a field's length away. Freddy Vernon was with him.

"I wonder she did not go with the old people," he said, waving his hand the way Mrs. Harding had disappeared.

"The old people?"

"Well, her father and mother. Didn't you see them? The old man is rather striking to look at. Not that he is exactly old. Not more than sixty, I should think, but those people age so. The father might be her grandfather. He was standing by you at the grave—a tall old chap, his hands crossed on a stick; they were mottled with blackberry juice or something like it. She's very good to them—or her husband was. They've got that little house, Widdicombe, that stands back in the trees over there—you remember. Between you and me, Bretherton, the good people about here must have been disappointed that they found so little amiss in Mrs. Harding's conduct. She has behaved excellently to her people, without forcing them into a position they were not meant for. You haven't met her?—ah, well, our poor friend's folly might have been worse."

Bretherton winced, but Freddy Vernon went on without noticing him.

"You know what county-people are, moss-grown with prejudices. I believe they might in time forget Mrs. Harding's unjustifiable entry into their citadels if she'd give them a chance. She doesn't. She keeps herself to herself. You know, our friend did his best to educate her. It isn't so easy—after twenty-five. He had her taught to ride. She took to that kindly. Rides with the best of them. Few men of our friend's age would have done it. Too many opportunities in the hunting-field and jogging home leisurely in the early dusk—hey?"

"Please don't let us discuss Mrs. Harding any more, Vernon," said Bretherton sharply. "Of course I know you mean it all right, but . . ."

"Oh, very well, old chap," said Freddy, imperturbably. Freddy had reverted easily to the familiarity of old Eton days. "I didn't think you minded. Didn't do you a very good turn, or—you were a hot-headed chap. Always were under that stiff reserve of yours. Poor old chap! After all, why shouldn't he have his consolations? Other men would have taken them in another way. He didn't. She made an excellent wife to him, I believe."

There was no use minding Vernon. At that moment a tall figure clad in the velveteen and gaiters of a gamekeeper jumped lightly over the

stile in front of them and passed them without any sign of greeting.

"That's a cousin of Mrs. Harding's," Vernon said, turning his head back to look after the straight, well-braced figure. "Owes your family no great love, Bretherton. They say Mrs. Harding and he were boy and girl sweethearts. Just talk, I should say. These places buzz with talk. Didn't look friendly, did he? And didn't trouble to touch his cap."

Bretherton's face darkened. He remembered the poisonous woman at the "Good King Henry" yesterday. Again his old resentment against his cousin's marriage returned to fill his heart with bitterness.

CHAPTER IV

"Mr. Harding's will is very simple," said Freddy Vernon, opening a despatch-box which lay before him on the table. "With the exception of some legacies to the servants and to charities, and a hundred pounds a-piece to Colonel Strode and Sir Arthur Dashwood, who are his executors, the will concerns only one or two persons."

They were in the library at Littlecombe Hall. They had come back after the funeral to a house with all the blinds drawn up, windows open to let in the mild air which had followed after the storm, fires burning brightly everywhere.

The two old friends who were named executors of the will sat in the background of the room. Bretherton had had a word with them. He had not seen them for some years. Colonel Strode was a little more frosty in hair and complexion; the poker down his back kept him less rigid than of old. Sir Arthur was more port-winey than of old. He spent his

Augusts in Kissingen now instead of after the grouse. His hands, knotted and twisted with rheumatism, were almost out of the semblance of hands.

The library had a formal appearance. Chairs seemed to have gone back against the wall, a position they were not used to occupy. It was a dim room usually. Now the light from a window, pulled down at the top, was on the widow's face where she sat by the table, her veil thrown back.

Bretherton, his back to the window, had an excellent view of the face. It was something of a shock to him. He had been prepared for the milkmaid prettiness, for rose-and-white rusticity. Mrs. Harding, as she leant forward, her chin propped on her hand, was not pretty at all. He ought to have known old Edward better than to suppose that he would be caught by the lure of mere prettiness. Some people might not have looked twice at her face.

It was a shock to the man who had been expecting something very different. If anything the lines of it inclined to a certain massiveness. The colour was pale—a wholesome, olive paleness, as though the red were just a little behind. Perhaps she had spent too much time indoors or her colour would have been ruddier. The nose was straight, a

little thick; the lips seriously and tenderly moulded. As she sat, her head turned a little sideways, the line of the face from the ear to the chin was perfect. The expression was almost solemn. With the dark hair curtaining the brows and the large quiet eyes she might have sat for an allegorical figure of Night. If she had smiled the whole expression of her face might have been altered. She did not smile; and Bretherton had an impression of a brooding motherliness. She was a peasant, the child of peasants, the inheritor of gipsy blood. Something of the solemnity of woods and pastures, of the wide-spreading trees, of the ruminating cattle, was in her serious, tender gaze. She looked as though she would have a free walk, the walk of one for whom houses are a superfluity.

All this seemed to come to him later. At the moment he was only aware of the curious dignity of the woman. Again he remembered how he had torn in two his cousin's letter which pleaded for sympathy and understanding, and flung it into the fire. After all, as even Freddy Vernon had discovered, Edward Harding had his excuses. He ought to have waited to hear and to see.

The reading of the will had begun. The first sentences passed by him unnoticed,

so engrossed was he by the revelation of what manner of woman his cousin had married.

"I leave to my dear wife, Elizabeth Harding, the use, for her lifetime, of Littlecombe Hall, with all its furniture, pictures, china, wine, carriages and horses and all appurtenances. I leave to her also the sum of three thousand pounds a year for life, to be hers even in case of re-marriage. I wish her to have Littlecombe Hall, because I desire her to live in such dignity as shall prove to all the world the high honour and love in which I hold her. I desire also that she shall have the use of such of the family jewels as are heirlooms for life. I may say here that in the matter of domicile I have over-ruled her will. Her wishes are for a simpler style of living and a much smaller provision. To my cousin, Ralph Bretherton, I leave all of which I die possessed beyond my explicit legacies to other people. To him or his heirs the reversion of Littlecombe Hall, its furniture, pictures, china, wine, horses and carriages, and all jewellery which is of the nature of heirlooms after the decease of my wife, together with the reversion of her annuity of three thousand pounds yearly. I desire that he will. . . ."

Here followed a string of instructions as to

certain things the testator wished to be done or preserved.

Bretherton listened in bewilderment. For a moment he was dazed. He had hardly expected his name to be mentioned in the will at all. His inmost hope had been that there might be something in it which would relieve him of that painful sense that the cousin who had been so good to him long ago had died with a wound between them unhealed.

As Freddy Vernon droned through the latter part of the will, Bretherton covered his face with his hands. It was too much. At the moment he was so overwhelmed that he could not remember to be glad that he was once again a rich man; that Littlecombe, if not his yet, would come to his children; that he had two other houses to live in as he chose, quite as important, if less dear to him, than Littlecombe Hall.

Again the sound of his own name drew him out of his abstraction. He came to himself with a start. Freddy Vernon was closing and locking up his despatch-box, but a large white envelope lay on the table before him. He groped back for the beginning of the sentence in which his name had occurred, and found that he had heard it without knowing.

"Our client also left in our charge a letter which was to be given to his cousin, Mr. Ralph Bretherton, after his death. That letter I now have the privilege of delivering to him."

Bretherton took the letter, glancing at the name and address written in Edward Harding's fine up-and-down hand, with the beautiful clear strokes, so unlike the handwriting of an old man, and put it in an inner pocket. He felt he wanted to be alone to read the letter. The widow stood up, making a quaint little curtsey to the room in general, and went out by the door behind Vernon's back.

Bastable came into the room.

"Luncheon is on the table, gentlemen," he said.

The four men went into the dining-room together. Bretherton ate and drank without knowing what the dishes or the wines were. The other men were seriously congratulatory.

"We'll have you back again, Bretherton," Sir Arthur Dashwood said. "We'll all of us be very glad, very glad. Can't you come and stay with us for a few days? Lady Dashwood will be delighted. I'm glad my old friend did the right thing at the last. I wouldn't have acted if he hadn't. Neither would Strode."

"Mrs. Harding behaved very well, very well," Colonel Strode said, peering eagerly

into his curry. "No one could say she was selfish. It has all turned out wonderfully well, much better than we could have expected. Mrs. Harding keeps a very good cook. I don't know why, I never can get curry like this at Lahore Lodge. To be sure, India spoils you for the ordinary English curry. But this could hardly be bettered. I'll send my wife over to see how it's made."

With a sense of strangeness Bretherton found himself pushed into the position of host. Bastable had set him the chair at the head of the table, had placed the decanters in front of him, and the cigars alongside, when the dishes were removed. The other men deferred to him as the host. There was humour in Freddy Vernon's gaze under the conventional solemnity necessary to the house of mourning. To Vernon's mind he had never seen a man so completely bowled over by good luck as old Bretherton. To be sure, it had been uncommonly hard on him to be pushed out by Mrs. Harding as he had been; but at least she had spared him the presentation of a son and heir to Edward Harding and Littlecombe. That had been very decent of her, to Freddy's mind. Perhaps the old fellow's generosity and sense of justice would have gone under if he had had a son. Freddy had known the possession

of such a thing to develop a secondary selfishness in a man out of all proportion to his interest in his own Ego. He had no idea—he would have scoffed at such a thing, knowing or thinking he knew human nature with a lawyer's peculiar opportunities for such knowledge—that Bretherton's mind at the moment was concerned with the amazement of finding Mrs. Harding so different a creature from what he had been imagining her, with a painful and grievous sense of his harshness to Edward Harding, not with the sudden wealth which would have made most men fling their caps in the air, when the eyes of the world were off them.

"Shall we travel up to town together?" Freddy Vernon was asking.

Bretherton's first impulse was to say "Yes." There was nothing to keep him here. Great as the widow's magnanimity might be, she had evinced no desire for an interview with him. He felt an intruder in the absence of such a wish on her part. Even in old Bastable's eyes he seemed to read a knowledge that he had been over-generously treated, but that there were limits he might not pass.

On a second impulse he answered "No." If Vernon would be so good as to take his traps to the station in the brougham which was

now standing at the door, he would come up by a later train. He must call at the Vicarage to see Trant, who had coached him for Mods., had, indeed, taught him his first Latin and Greek long ago. It would be too ungrateful to miss seeing Trant, who had been too ill with bronchitis to officiate at the funeral. Trant would feel it, so would Mrs. Trant, if they knew that he had come and gone without seeing them.

He returned on the field-path by which he had walked back from the funeral, taking the way to Littlecombe Vicarage, where he supposed he should find the Rev. Septimus nursing his bronchitis, and as happy as it would let him be, in a chintz-hung upper room with a roaring fire, and books and papers about him. The parish was a large and scattered one, and only when the bronchitis laid hold of him did the vicar feel at liberty to enjoy himself after his own heart.

He stopped short, however, of the gabled Vicarage, pausing at the lych-gate which led to the churchyard. It was a mild, sunny afternoon, and the pale light lay over the graves and the squat Norman church. He turned in by the lych-gate, made his way to the church porch, and sat down on one of the ancient seats. There was not a soul about. Littlecombe church, in which Erasmus had

once preached on the Folly of Woman, might be seen any week-day by asking for the keys at the Vicarage. This time of year few people asked for the keys.

He put his hand in his breast-pocket and found his cousin's letter. For the first time in the emotions of the last hour or so he remembered the word spoken in the dead man's ear, and was glad it had been spoken before the reading of the will. Dear old fellow! he had dealt too generously with him, been too forgiving. He was abashed, amazed, overwhelmed. He could not yet believe in the change in his circumstances which put him back once more where he had been before Edward Harding's marriage. To be sure, Littlecombe was not his nor likely to be, seeing that the widow must be some half-dozen years his junior and looked to have the perfect health of her peasant blood. In his abasement he was glad he was not given Littlecombe, though it should come to his children. His spirit cried out against the too much generosity with which he had been treated.

He opened the letter, and, unfolding it, inclined the page to catch upon it the last rays of the dying sun.

"My dear Ralph"—it ran—"I should like you to know something of the reasons which

have induced me to make you my heir after all, although, as you know, I am free to leave my property where I will. I will confess that your reception of my advances five years ago hurt me badly. You would not come and see for yourself, although I asked you, the thing which justified my marriage; you never answered at all the prayer for sympathy and forgiveness which I tried to put into the letter, and which I have no doubt you found there. You disappointed me, Ralph, for I was very good to you in the old days. That my will restores you to the old place is due to that admirable woman, my wife. If you had known my wife, as I hoped you would, you would have known that no excuse was necessary for my marriage—unless I asked to be understood and excused because I, a sick man, should have chained so much beauty and kindness and excellence to my sick-bed. I should like you to be friends with Lizzie even now, if it be possible. She will be lonely, I am afraid, when I am gone; she is not the woman to make many intimacies. I should be glad if you could win your way to her friendship, although I warn you that it will not be easily won. You owe it to her that you are in the old place in my will. She would have given you Littlecombe too if I had allowed it. She asked only to retire to the Orchard House, which she

said would have been big enough for all her needs. But I felt that her being dispossessed of Littlecombe might be misunderstood by others. I wanted the whole world to see in what honour and estimation I held her. My intention was to leave her all I possessed, having entire confidence and trust in her disposal of my property as in all else. She would not have it so. She insisted that I should give and not she.

"I feel I yet owe you an explanation of what seemed to you the amazing selfishness of my marriage. It has an explanation; and it is not any of those which will most easily occur to you, creditable or discreditable to me. It is one which is so amazing to myself that I think you would never guess it. If you have the privilege of Lizzie's friendship, in time she may perhaps tell it to you herself. It will exonerate me more than anything I could advance. I have tried to rise to the heights of the sacrifice she has made for me, and to some extent I hope I have succeeded.

"Believe me, my dear Ralph,
"Your affectionate cousin,
"EDWARD HARDING."

Having read the letter through slowly, Bretherton turned it about and glanced at the date. The ninth of September—three months

ago. And the will had been dated the eighth of September. Apparently the will had cancelled an earlier one. He could only conjecture that it had taken Mrs. Harding some considerable time to bring her husband to allot the property as she wished. Something Freddy Vernon had said to him with unctuous gaiety, of his having had a narrow squeak, was explicable by the date of the will.

He sat looking for several minutes at the signature to the letter before he folded it and put it into his pocket. The clang of the church clock striking half-past three, the sudden falling of the pale sun behind a ragged mass of cloud, reminded him that the time was short.

He had time for a cup of tea with the Trants and a talk before he need set out for the railway-station. He was not going back to Littlecombe, but would walk across the fields to the station.

He listened to the simple, friendly talk of the Vicar and his wife, who were very glad to see him again after his long absence. He had not very much to say, but the kind couple excused him, thinking in their own minds that it must be very painful for Ralph to come back to Littlecombe, which had once been his own home, to the funeral of the cousin to whom he had been so devoted from his boyhood. Why, he had adored Edward Harding in those old days.

Ralph was abstracted, his eyes looking inward from the kindly people and the pleasant room at his own thoughts. Mrs. Trant, who had been fond of him from a boy, could notice, unobserved, the light sprinkling of grey in the brown of his hair; she shook her head over it in pity and regret.

They talked of the old times as though the new times had no significance for any of them. But at last, when the time was growing short, the Vicar anticipated his wife, saying a word for Mrs. Harding.

"It was very hard on you, my dear boy," he said, "very hard. But it has turned out so much better than any of us could hope—she is really a good woman, my dear Ralph, a noble woman, a fine creature—that I hope she will see the justice of . . ."

Bretherton recovered himself with a start. Of course they knew nothing about the will. He smiled faintly, recalling that Mrs. Trant's eyes had been asking him questions across the tea-tray any time these forty minutes back.

"My cousin's will leaves me residuary legatee," he said. "I forgot to tell you. Mrs. Harding has Littlecombe and three thousand a year for life.

"And you nearly went without telling us!" said Mrs. Trant, with uplifted hands.

CHAPTER V

Back in London, Bretherton was overcome with a sense of disillusionment. He had his moments when such a mood was upon him, when he had the sadness of the Psalmist for the passing away of the world and the unprofitableness of all things.

He was in London soon after seven; and he had the somewhat unusual experience of dining alone in a restaurant. He might have had a choice of houses to dine at. There were a few more friendly notes on his table—a few more cards on his mantelpiece. One had an item of news for him. His little friend, Violet Maynard, was engaged to be married. Lady Maynard called on him to rejoice with her. It was an intimate little note. Algy Braithwaite, with a place in Yorkshire and five thousand a year, was quite satisfactory. Vi was extremely happy.

Bretherton smiled to himself. Violet was one of the girls to whom he had had to be markedly friendly. She had jibbed a bit at

Algy Braithwaite, a young ass who wore coloured socks and parted his hair in the middle over a brainless forehead. He—Ralph—had jibbed when Lady Maynard had suggested that he who had such influence with dear Vi should persuade her to be civil to Algy. He had refused somewhat curtly. He could disregard Vi's pleading eyes across a ballroom, but he drew the line at advising the child to marry Braithwaite. So Lady Maynard had brought it off. Those worldly-wise mothers! A cynical little smile played about the corners of his lips as he imagined Lady Maynard's feelings when the news reached her ears that he was once again a *parti*. She had always been very good to him, but she had hinted a little too plainly about Vi. She might have left something to his good sense and good feeling.

Sitting in the tawdry little French restaurant, with crimson-shaded lights and mirrors everywhere reflecting the opulent charms of the ladies who came in to dine—it had hardly seemed worth while to go West to his Club—it struck him oddly that here he sat with a fortune new-fallen in his lap, utterly disinclined to call in anyone to rejoice with him. He realized for the first time that his fall of five years ago had hurt him, although it had been

broken by his sense of humour. He did not relish the idea of the *volte face* so many of his friends would make when they heard of his change of fortune. He said to himself that he would let them discover his changed circumstances in time; from the list of wills in the daily newspapers; from one source or another; not from him. The situation would have its humorous aspects. He did not particularly want to play a malicious jest on his fair friends. Only none of them, not even the daughterless ones, had been that to him which would make him run to them with his news.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! The cooking was really very good at the French restaurant, but he might have been eating lentils and pulse for all the satisfaction he was conscious of. When he had finished and paid his bill his watch told him it was only ten minutes past eight. There was a score of houses where he might have dropped in after dinner and been sure of his welcome. It was too early for anything of the kind. They would barely have sat down to dinner.

Out again in the street he walked along under the stars, hardly troubling as to what direction he took, although from habit he went West. A long string of omnibuses passed him going down the Strand. He glanced at

them without seeing them. The flaring lights about the box-office of a theatre fell full on one of the omnibuses, a green one. A place-name reached his consciousness—Holloway. He had a sudden thought—why not go see Rose Bourne? He remembered that she had said to him that he would find her at home of an evening if it suited him better. She was not always free in the afternoon; but no one claimed her evenings *now*. The emphasis on the *now* had had an envious and unhappy sound.

He had not thought of wondering what Rose was doing. He supposed Cuthbert Bourne had left her very badly off, else it would not have been—Holloway.

He signalled to a cab, sprang into it and gave the address—27, Salamanca Road, Holloway.

The hansom turned about, crossed the Strand and made for Kingsway. For a little while Bretherton, leaning across the doors of the hansom, was in a world he knew; but presently he was out of it, in a horrible network of streets north of Holborn, ill-lit, except where a fried-fish stall or a public-house flared, saturated with the fried-fish smell which is the overpowering odour of London's mean streets. He was smoking an excellent cigar, but through its fragrance that dreadful, dulling, depressing

smell reached him; seemed to cling to his lips, to his hands, his clothing. He looked up at the windows of the houses he passed, mean and squalid houses for the greater part. Behind the lit blinds figures moved to and fro. He wondered what common joys and sorrows, what comedies and tragedies of human life were going on behind those blinds. The streets, in their uniform ugliness, were worse than positive slums. The slum is not without its picturesqueness.

He breathed more freely when he reached the flare of the Holloway Road where a street market was in full swing; and the light of the naphtha lamps seemed to make a lurid reflection on the sky. He had caught the name of a railway-station, and knew he was in the Holloway Road. Else all these were unfamiliar regions to him. Poor Rose! He remembered her a muslin-clad girl in a vicarage garden; he remembered the scent of the roses that had been in her breast on the one occasion when she had let him kiss her and take her in his arms, because she was going to accept Cuthbert Bourne and the play was at an end. The roses had been broken between his breast and hers in that one passionate, ardent embrace. He remembered the sharp, bruised scent of them, and how his own heart had seemed to be

broken like the roses. What a place for Rose to decline on in her widowhood! And the child too—the child who had Rose's colour, with a shy grace he had not known in Rose.

Salamanca Road. The name, in white, flashed at him from a street corner. The cab turned into a road of houses with bow-windowed fronts and a flight of steps up to their hall-doors. Most of the houses had a gas-jet over the hall door dimly illuminating a number and a name. Ah—there it was, No. 27, and a foolish name, Rosetta. He wondered what the house wanted with a name and a number too.

He told the cabman to wait while he knocked at the hall-door. He would have to walk some distance to find a cab and Rose might be out or not prepared to receive him. After all, it struck him as an odd thing that he should have called at this hour. It must be nearly nine o'clock—very late for Holloway, he imagined.

While he stood groping for a bell the sound of a piano being played in the house reached his ears, and some one began to sing. The voice had been a good one once, but was now somewhat cracked. Rose! He remembered how Rose had sung the old ballads with a bewildering coquetry long ago. "Should He

Upbraid" and "My Mother Bids Me Bind My Hair"—Rose used to turn his head with her songs.

Before he rang the bell he turned about and dismissed the cabman. Rose was at home. She would see him. At the worst it would only mean walking down the Holloway Road to the railway-station to find a cab.

Mrs. Bourne was at home. The capless woman who admitted him, who had the look of a superior upper servant, did not seem to doubt that Mrs. Bourne would receive him. When he gave his name he had a curious idea that something of interest came into her expressionless face. He wondered if she had heard of him before.

He was shown into the room where Mrs. Bourne, seated at the piano, turned about with a little cry of pleasure as she heard his name. He shook hands with her, then looked towards the girl who was slowly getting to her feet from the hearthrug. When he had come in unexpectedly she had been lying all along the dirty white rug, a book open in front of her, reading. Only extreme youth and slenderness could have carried off the position. It had been grace itself in his one glimpse of it. She had been lying partly sideways, her cheek propped on her elbow. She had lain as

unconsciously as a young animal, with an animal-like, supple grace.

"How good of you!" cried Rose, with an almost exaggerated warmth of greeting. "Imagine coming into these wilds to find us! Have you dined? We keep such unfashionable hours in these regions that one forgets. And here is Avis. Burning her face, the foolish child, as though complexions didn't count. Here is a comfortable chair, Ralph—not beautiful. Let us have coffee, Avis dear."

The girl, having shaken hands, shyly disappeared from the room. He sat down in the chair Rose had pushed towards him—a chair of saddle-bags, with a delusive air of being comfortable. He glanced round the room. Tasteless, every bit of it, except for a few Eastern curios here and there. Heavy, dark-red curtains to the windows; a heavy, ugly carpet on the floor; furniture heavy without giving an impression of strength and durability.

"Horrid, isn't it?" Rose said sympathetically, as his eyes came back to her face. "We're in furnished lodgings."

"Oh!" He flushed; he had not meant to betray his secret thoughts.

She clasped her hands together, leaning on the mantelshelf. Her face was in shadow. Something of grace in the attitude recalled the

Rose of old, the Avis of to-day. The line from the supple waist to the swelling bust had been beautiful in Avis as she lay on the hearthrug.

"I don't mind so much," Mrs. Bourne sighed. "Not at all for myself—only for Avis. What do you think of her, Ralph?"

"She is very like you, as I recall you."

"Only prettier. Confess that she is prettier! Ah, but she is! Those old days, Ralph. How good they were! Do you remember the garden at Hurstcot and the summer-house? The little gate that opened among the Portugal laurels? The apple trees in the garden-beds; the dial; the smell of the box-borders in heat? How the birds used to sing there, Ralph! Do you remember the nightingales?"

He remembered the nightingales. They had been singing in his one passionate hour of gain and loss.

Rose did not seem to remember it. She sat down in the chair facing him and looked into the heart of the fire as though she saw her youth there. All unconscious, he observed her. It gave him a little shock, seeing her for the first time in full light, to notice how flaccid the muscles of her face and neck were, how the colour he remembered so fresh and radiant had

run in streaks, dulled and faded. Her hair even had a dusty look. As she sat there in the chair, not braced and uplifted, in her rusty blacks, she had a dreadful suggestion of the women he sometimes saw in the streets, bonneted and bugled, the middle-aged women of the London 'bus. He cried out silently against the change in Rose. She could not be much over forty—perhaps forty-two or forty-three. The women of his acquaintance knew how to be charming much later than that. Poor Rose!

She turned her eyes suddenly upon him, and he flushed up as though she might have detected his thoughts.

"You look wonderfully well, Ralph, wonderfully young and handsome and prosperous. Yet you've had your ups and downs like myself. I heard how you'd lost your inheritance. Cuthbert's sister Lucy married a parson in the next parish to Littlecombe. It hasn't told on you. Why, it makes me feel immortally old to see you sitting there looking so well, and I only an old ghost—an old ghost."

There had been a moment when caution had whispered in Ralph Bretherton's ear. Was it altogether wise to pick up again the acquaintance with his old love, poor and widowed? He was glad now that he had repulsed caution

with something of scorn. The veriest fop could not have supposed that this Rose had matrimonial designs upon him; and there was nothing of the fop in Bretherton.

He tried to say something polite, but she silenced him with a wave of her hand.

"Never mind, Ralph," she said. "Don't perjure yourself, old friend. I've had my day and it's over. Cuthbert was very good to me, Ralph. It wasn't his fault that he made wrong investments, was it? I'm glad he died, poor fellow, before he knew how rotten they were. There was nothing left except Cuthbert's little house in Surrey. We tried living there, Avis and I. We could have been perfectly happy. Adams, who opened the door to you—Cuthbert's mother sent her to us the year after we were married—she is our one bright spot. Adams would have done all the work of the house herself, with what help we could have given her. But we couldn't afford to stay there. We had to let it. Avis is still heart-broken for it. She has no friends, poor child! I am training her for a professional singer. I can't even afford her the proper tuition. I give music-lessons here. It is miserably paid. But with those and the rent of Honeywells—fortunately we were able to let—we can keep going."

He made an inarticulate sound of pity. As

she talked he became aware, at first dimly, later with a certainty, that here was a sick woman. Ill-health was at the root of Rose's dismal ageing, which had frightened him somewhat as though he felt old age and loneliness knocking at his own door. And he unprovided. Rose, at least, had a child. He remembered old Trant, whose sons and daughters were scattered up and down the world—Mrs. Trant always had eight letters to write on Indian mail days, to say nothing of China and Canada. Old Trant had been used to say that the immortality every man could lay hold on—whether he believed in another world or not—was the immortality of children. If age should come to him as it had come to Rose it would find him unprepared.

"I feel I can tell you, knowing of your own misfortunes," she said, with what he felt vaguely to be a heroic smile, "because you also are a poor devil, though I beg a thousand pardons for saying it. You look so little like it. I haven't troubled my rich friends. After all, the child will not be quite unprovided for. She will have Honeywells. It brings us two hundred a year. And Adams will watch over her like a faithful, honest watch-dog. Only—she will be lonely."

A great rush of pity came over the man's

heart. He looked at his life as it might have been. If he had married Rose, and if Rose were ill as she was now! Something of the personal anguish and fear that might have been his were revealed to him.

"What is the matter, Rose?" he asked, leaning forward and taking her hand. "Tell me. If there is anything money can do. . . . Oh, I can afford it. You needn't be afraid. For the sake of old times, my dear."

"Hush!" she said. "I thought I heard Avis. She is taking a long time over that coffee. Perhaps she knew old friends wanted to talk together. I'll tell you, Ralph. Only—don't make any sign when she comes back. I am a woman with a mortal illness. I ought to have an operation, but I've postponed it as long as I could—for the child's sake. She doesn't suspect. I rather imagine I've postponed it too long. There won't be any long sick nursing for my poor little girl."

Her smile had something triumphant in it. Sitting there, holding her hands, he saw Rose, dear and precious, as she might have been if she had married him and not Cuthbert Bourne.

"This must not go on, Rose," he said, and his voice trembled. "As your old friend I forbid it. You are to have the best expert advice in London at once, no matter what it

costs. Does it matter, Rose, dear—to you and me—that my money procures you what is a matter of life and death? If you had taken me and not Cuthbert Bourne—how I suffered, poor little devil!—you could have dipped in my pocket as deep as you would. Do it now, Rose, though I have not the conventional right. For the child's sake. Rose, Rose, what are conventions to you and me at a moment like this?"

She suddenly began to weep.

"How good you are, Ralph!" she said, gratefully, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "There, don't be alarmed. I shan't make a scene. At my age people don't cry easily nor profusely. That belongs to the young. Poor Cuthbert! I'm glad the poor fellow didn't live to know about me."

There was the sound of approaching footsteps and Avis came in, followed by the woman-servant with a little tray containing coffee cups and a pot. The coffee smelt fragrant. The tray, with its embroidered cloth and its tiny porcelain cups, was pleasantly dainty in the ugly room. Avis poured out the coffee and he drank two or three cups of it. Afterwards Avis sang for him, in a pure, rich mezzo-soprano which flooded the dingy room with its harmonies. He sat watching her from his dim

corner; the slight figure in its simple black frock had the suggestion of an unblown bud; the white neck, from which the notes seemed to be shaken in a golden rain, showed above the low collar of the dress. The sleeping passion in the shy eyes revealed itself as she sang. Her eyes were starry, uplifted, hidden no longer.

CHAPTER VI

It was as though the cares of a family had suddenly been thrust upon the man who had grown accustomed to think of himself as a confirmed bachelor.

It fell to him to go and see Sir Bryce Hawkins, the leading specialist in the malady from which Rose suffered. They had met occasionally in society, and he felt that an explanation was due to the great surgeon as well as to himself.

"The lady is," he said, "a very old friend of mine." He hurried on in some confusion at the expression in the surgeon's face, hastening to disabuse him of the thing he might be thinking. "A very old friend. In fact, she might have been my wife if she would. She has been left a widow within the last couple of years, and is ill-provided for. She has lived out of England. I had not seen her for about twenty years till we had an accidental meeting at a street-crossing the other day. She is afraid the operation may be a critical one. She

has a little daughter. I want the best possible done for her; so I come to you. You understand I make all the arrangements—I am responsible."

"Quite, my dear fellow." Sir Bryce's face wore its most impassive expression. "I can give your friend an appointment to-morrow at three o'clock. If I find an operation is necessary—we can't always trust a patient's judgment in these matters—she had better come into my nursing home. It is close at hand—just at the back of this house in fact. If we must operate, be sure I shall do my best for you and for the lady."

"She has a young daughter about eighteen. She would be alone in the world. . . ."

"Bring the lady to me to-morrow at three," Sir Bryce repeated, ringing the bell; and the interview was at an end.

He had had to be very firm with Rose, who had tried to back out of seeing the specialist.

"I am almost sorry you turned up after all," she said, with a spark in her eye that recalled the old Rose. "I could only have died. I don't want to be hacked and hewed; I want to die as the Lord made me."

He felt the most tender pity for her. Always, always, behind this mature, sickly Rose, there was the radiant girl of long ago. And she

might have been his wife. She might have been his one ship going down before his eyes on the lonely ocean. He had an odd reflected anguish from what might have been. Truth to tell, he had forgotten Rose till she sprang into his sight by lamplight at the London crossing. His passion for her was as dead as Julius Caesar, little likely to be revived by this Rose which had been overblown before it was withered. And yet—he felt himself looking at her as though through the eyes of a man to whom she was everything.

He did not accompany Rose to Sir Bryce Hawkins's consulting-room. That would be to put himself just a little too much in the husband's place. She had Adams to go with her. Adams was perfectly trustworthy and careful. He, meanwhile—there was something for him to do. Rose smiled a speechless gratitude at him when he remarked that it would be his business to see after and distract Avis.

"I'll take her somewhere for the day, Rose," he said; they had slipped back to the use of Christian names as though twenty years did not lie between the old days and these. "You'll trust me with Avis?"

"Oh, I'll trust you," she said, and looked at him with a certain passionate intensity in her

gaze. "If the Lord hadn't meant me to trust you He'd never have sent you my way just at this moment. Read that, Ralph. It came this afternoon."

She tossed him a letter across the tea-table, and watched him while he read it.

"I told you so," she said, not waiting for him to speak. "Honeywells was not the place for her Ladyship at all. There is absolutely nothing to do—unless one adores the country —at Honeywells."

The letter was from the lady who was Rose's tenant. She found the place impossible. It did not agree with her health. She did not think the sanitation was very good. Her doctor advised Aix, and she was leaving at once. Some one would remain in charge till Mrs. Bourne could take over the house. She enclosed a cheque for the next quarter's rent in lieu of notice, and she trusted Mrs. Bourne would not be much inconvenienced by this sudden termination of her tenancy.

"You see," Rose said. "We shall never let again. Every drop of hot water has to be carried and every drop of cold water pumped. And we have only oil-lamps. We are horribly behind the times at Honeywells. I should not be surprised, indeed, if the sanitation were defective."

"You would be better there than here," he said, "to make your convalescence."

"Till I can begin work again," she assented. "That is, if I ever do begin. And the fifty guineas will pay for the operation, I suppose—or will it?"

"Oh, yes," said Ralph, committing himself to what he knew to be a lie. "Supposing I change that cheque for you. You may want ready money to clear out of this. As for the doctor, I shall arrange that."

She did not protest—only looked at him with eyes of a strained brightness.

"I will come in the morning for Avis," he said. "If it is fine and frosty, as it promises to be, I shall take her a little way out of town. A country walk would do her good. If it is not fine, there are many things to do in London. It is good of you to trust me with the child, Rose."

He lifted her hand and kissed it; and would have gone away only she implored him to stay.

"We can't give you much of a meal, Ralph," she said. "Nothing at all to take the place of your dinner. But we shall get you something. You will be a Good Samaritan if you stay to-night. I confess that I don't like to spend the evening alone with Avis."

He consented readily enough. For some reason or other he was out of conceit with the scented boudoirs, the quiet little dinners, the low talk and laughter beneath the shaded lights. He was engrossed for the moment in one of the world's real tragedies. Something he could not fix floated through his memory. Was it Keats who said it? "Bring me no laurel crowns in a world where roses die and women have cancer." He was not sure of the quotation or its author. But it suited his mood. He was disillusioned for the pleasant things of the world.

He stayed till ten o'clock, having had a scratch meal which took the place of dinner. Avis had been told as much as was necessary. She wore something of the look of a little martyr, but she was very quiet, very brave. Now and again Rose nodded at her behind her back, lifting her hands to convey to Ralph how wonderful it was, and what a brave girl she had. The intimacy seemed to grow in those hours when Avis sang, her mother playing her accompaniments; when the two elders sat and talked in the glow of the fire, and the girl played softly to herself at the piano. He could hardly believe that three days ago he had not known that Rose Bourne and her girl were in the world. Perhaps he was framed for

the domesticities, he thought. If Rose had been his wife, how good the change in his fortunes would have been! He rejoiced now that the money made it possible to alleviate Rose's sad lot to the fullest extent. It might not be able to save her life, but, her life being saved—or, at least, her death postponed—he would be able to do everything possible to win her back to comparative health, to smooth and make easy her path to the grave.

He was at Salamanca Road by eleven o'clock the next morning. Dixon was amazed at his master's early rising and being abroad, although he knew his place too well to show his surprise.

He was knocking at the door, and realizing for the first time how dreary a place Salamanca Road was by daylight, when Adams opened the door to him. Miss Avis was nearly ready. Adams got as near a friendly smile as her natural stiffness would permit. Would Mr. Bretherton come into the drawing-room?

Rose was sitting at the table, her writing-desk open before her.

"I am so glad it is such a fine morning," she said. "It will be the country to-day, won't it? Take Avis away quickly, Ralph. I am settling my affairs. I don't want the child to see me do it. That fifty pounds will come

in uncommonly well. I need not owe a penny in the world—except to you."

He answered her a trifle gruffly that there was plenty of time to settle her affairs. Even if she had to go to the nursing-home it would not be just yet. There would be an interval.

"I'm not sure," she said, smiling. "See here." She lifted a newspaper by her elbow and indicated a little pile of tradesmen's books. "I am going to go round and pay them all as soon as you've taken Avis away. I feel as strong as a horse this morning. Poor Cuthbert! It reminds me how before Avis was born I *would* settle all my affairs, nearly breaking the poor boy's heart. I wonder why women are so cruel? I believe I liked to feel that I was breaking his heart."

Avis came into the room, dressed for out-of-doors in a neat frock of navy serge, with a touch of scarlet in her wide hat. She had a distracted, bewildered air which she tried to keep out of sight; and there were dark rings about her eyes.

Her mother drew her to her and kissed her, putting up a hand to caress the soft, chestnut braids into which the girl's hair had been put away.

"Go and enjoy yourself, little daughter," she

said. "Be sure there will be good news when you come back."

"I would rather stay," said Avis; pitifully. "Couldn't I come with you to the doctor's? Not that I am ungrateful to Mr. Bretherton. It is so kind of him to take me."

The mother laughed and kissed her again, bidding her be off. There was a cab at the door. Bretherton put Avis in carefully, followed her and told the driver to take them to Marylebone. He took tickets for a high place in the Chilterns. It was a shining winter day. The London streets were sunny, with a suggestion of the haze that should come later in the day. The cab took them through Regent's Park, where the nursemaids were already out with their charges and a few country-lovers were solacing their hearts as much as might be walking over the drift of leaves.

"I have heard people say," Bretherton said, looking at the girl's averted profile, "that Regent's Park made a very satisfactory substitute for the country. They were Londoners, of course."

"It always has a suggestion of sickliness to me," she answered, with sudden fire. "London looks to me always as though I saw it through yellow glasses—at least, in autumn and winter. They were lovely at Honeywells."

He drew her on to talk of the country home she had lost. Something was taking shape in his mind. If Honeywells were to be left on Rose's hands, would it not be better that they should be there? He said to himself that Rose would never teach again. No matter how the operation went the grey streets of London would be no place for her. She would be out of the battle of life. She would be a non-combatant henceforth.

The girl talked of her woods. At Woodhay every one was friendly. She could go where she would. She knew all the great, quiet woods by heart. Plainly she had found them friendly and ready to give up their secrets. She knew every one. The gamekeepers only touched their caps to her when they met her in the forbidden places.

Last summer they had gone into Sussex for a week—to an old black-and-white inn sunk in the cup of a valley, with steep hills rising on every side. She had flown to the woods and had been turned out roughly by the first gamekeeper she met. She had had to keep to the field-paths and the roads. Plainly she sickened at London. She had no friends, had not been in the way of making them. There was something oddly solitary about her.

She had got over her first shyness and she

found it easy, even pleasant, to talk. She talked of the old life at Honeywells. Any attempt he made to get her to talk of the London life failed. She turned away from it with a little gesture of aversion.

She had not even a dog. Her dog—a bull-terrier—had died at Honeywells. She had had none since. She adored dogs. They were such sympathetic company. They always understood. Monk had been so wise. She might take him where the pheasants were thickest. He hardly blinked an eye when one scurried screaming across his path.

She was a strange mixture of woman and child—more child than woman. She said original things which delighted him, thoughtful things like the sayings of a very wise child. Sex was not yet awake in her at all. She told him how she longed for brothers, and her speech had a touch of slang now and again, delightfully incongruous with her looks, which reminded him of a picture he had seen somewhere of the young Beatrice "low-bosomed and with hidden feet."

They got out at a station which had a beautiful name and walked along by a delightfully clear river, running amber-brown over its little rocks and pebbles, presently climbed into high land with a wide sky running down to

woods at the horizon. They had lunch at an inn he knew which kept the good old customs. Every Sunday, he told her, the landlord presided over a long table, carving the joints for which the house was famous for the long rows of his patrons. It was a delightful inn, with so much to see belonging to the old times and the new.

They lunched in a diamond-paned oriel window, basking in a sun which might have been May's. There was a drowsy hum of bees from the hives in a hidden corner and a suggestion of summer sweetness was in the room. The landlady came in and told them the history of the inn's famous room, beaming on them while she talked. Plainly she suspected a love-affair. Many a honeymooning couple came, she said, to the "Duke's Head," and she displayed her Visitors' Book, in which, amid the banalities of the chance visitor, there peeped out here and there a shy little tribute to the charm of the place and the excellence of the management, the note of enthusiasm heightened by the moon that had not yet began to wane.

Bretherton smiled a little grimly at the good woman's assumption. He was interested in Avis as a charming child with the promise of being a beautiful and clever woman. The sex folded up in her left his own as unmoved as

though she were a boy, with just one tender touch of sentiment added because she was a girl and not a boy. A wild-flower, he said to himself, heartsick and stunted in growth by the London streets. She discovered so much to him of her mind and heart, he conjectured so much more to be discovered, that his curiosity, his interest, was excited. He said to himself that she would be his ally in that scheme of his for getting her mother back to Honeywells. Would Rose, worsted and useless in the battle of life, consent to take from his hand now something of what would have been her own if she had not preferred Cuthbert Bourne, a man full-grown, before his callow youth? He thought she might have to consent—for the child's sake.

No; he was not at all likely to fall in love with Avis. He said to himself that he was not young enough or old enough for that. In a sense he was nearer to loving her mother, behind whose sorrowful maturity he had elusive glimpses of the woman whom he might have loved as his wife.

CHAPTER VII

A TELEGRAM awaited them at Salamanca Road, to which they returned about four o'clock. It was from Rose and it was addressed to Bretherton.

"Come," it said, "and bring Avis. Adams will know what to send. I am not coming back."

The address was Waverley Street, the narrow street behind the street of stately Georgian houses in which Sir Bryce Hawkins' house was situated. The nursing-home was connected with the great specialist's house by a covered-in passage.

He had to comfort Avis, who had lost all her vivid bloom in the shock of the telegram. He understood the summons. Rose wanted to comfort her little daughter herself, to avert the mystery, the suspense that often make the acutest part of a suffering which one could bear if there were frankness and certainty.

They made the journey as fast as a hansom could take them, bringing Rose what things

Adams considered necessary ; the rest could follow to-morrow.

The nursing-home looked bright and cheerful enough from the outside, with lighted rooms behind all the white blinds. In the hall was a bright fire and a mass of flowers. Only through the perfume of the flowers there came, heavy and sinister, the smell of antiseptics, of anæsthetics.

They were shown into a cheerful sitting-room where Rose awaited them. Pictures on the walls, books and papers lying about ; here and there a bibelot of silver or china. The owners of the home had done their best to banish from it the associations of sickness and suffering ; but the suggestion was there all the same, creeping in by chinks and crevices, as insidious, as urgent as the light fog which hung in the room for all the fire and lamplight.

Rose came to meet them and took Avis in her arms. For a few seconds they clung together, while Bretherton, a lump in his throat, stood by the fireplace lifting a bibelot, inspecting it with apparent interest, putting it back without seeing it. There was a mirror over the chimney-piece. In spite of himself he could not help seeing what was happening behind his back. Rose had taken off her girl's hat and laid it aside. Her hand was caressing

softly the beautiful, abundant hair which lifted up from the nape of the neck yet fell upon its whiteness in softly-curling rings.

There was something of desperation in the way the girl clung to her mother. His eyes were humid. He wanted to comfort them, but did not know how to break in on that sacred suffering.

At last Rose put a stop to it. She pushed Avis gently into a chair.

"Dear friend," she said, coming to him, "this is hard on you. How good you have been to bring the child to me! After all—I did not mean to frighten her. It is better than long waiting. They do it to-morrow. Sir Bryce is quite cheerful. Do you hear, foolish little child?"—she turned to Avis with such an expression of maternal passion as made her more than beautiful—"Sir Bryce is not afraid. There is to be no long waiting, little heart. I could not have borne a long wait—nor you."

A cheerful nurse came in and asked if Mrs. Bourne would like some tea; and Ralph remembered that they had forgotten to have tea at Salamanca Road.

"I am trying to comfort this little daughter of mine, Nurse Bertha," Mrs. Bourne said. "We have never been separated before since she was born."

"And this will not be for long," Nurse Bertha said, in a brisk little voice. "We make people well, not keep them ill, here. To-morrow by this time you will be doing finely, Mrs. Bourne."

She had glanced sharply at Bretherton standing with an averted face by the chimney-piece. She thought she understood the situation. He and Mrs. Bourne would like a little time alone. She swooped down on Avis with her air of cheerful kindness.

"Come and help me to cut bread and butter," she said. "Do you know that this is tea-hour for all the patients? They are all clamouring for bread and butter. Come along and help."

She tucked Avis under her arm, figuratively, not literally, for she was a little Robin Redbreast of a woman, and carried her off, sending back a re-assuring nod and smile in Rose's direction. The door closed behind them. The man turned round and faced the room and the light. He had been afraid before of the emotions he felt must be visible in his face. This special kind of experience had not befallen him before. His father and mother had died when he was a child. The spectacle of the two piteous creatures clinging together had shaken him. His world would have been amazed if

it knew how unsophisticated he was behind his man-of-the-world impassivity.

"That was a good little woman to leave us together," Rose said. "I want to talk to you, Ralph. It is about Avis. My God! what am I to do about Avis? The operation is going to be a bad one. I've let it go too long Even if I pull through I shall be maimed and helpless. How can I be that? I could almost pray not to live, only the child loves me. Ralph, she has never slept out of the reach of my arms since she was first put into them."

He made a step or two towards her.

"Hush, Rose," he said. "Leave it to me. I will take care of Avis—and of you. You are not to trouble about anything."

She looked at him in amazement.

"Why, Ralph?" she said. "Why? You were in love with me once, my poor Ralph, but that is not enough. I do not even think that you loved me so well as to carry any of it to this day. I think you had forgotten me till we met at the crossing. It is pure mercy and goodness, Ralph—pure mercy and goodness—the goodness of God in you to me and my lamb. My God! I did not think such things were possible." She spoke with a reverent wonder and profound gratitude. "It is a

strange legacy I am leaving you, Ralph," she went on. "Not many men would accept such a legacy, or would be fit to be trusted with it, perhaps. What will you do with Avis? She is as innocent as a baby, full of tender and loving impulses, generous, passionate. How will you keep her?"

"Trust me to do my best for her," he said. "I have been thinking of it—not of Avis without you, but of you and Avis. Honeywells will be empty. You and Avis are to return there—with Adams. I shall see to the rest. I am really a rich man, Rose. I have been keeping it from you. My cousin has made me his heir after all. His wife only takes a life-interest in Littlecombe and three thousand a year. All the rest comes to me. I should not have known what to do with it. You see, for the last five years I have considered myself a poor man—a comparatively poor man. A woman has been very generous to me. Let me pay my debt to another woman."

Rose leant by the chimney-piece, her two hands clasped upon each other. The shadows were heavy on her face.

"A woman?" she repeated. "Your cousin married an impossible person, didn't he? A cook or something of the sort."

"If you had asked me that last week I should have said 'Yes.' To-night—well, it is not the first time that Nature has made a lady of her own. I might have trusted Edward Harding's fastidious taste. It is she who has given me back my inheritance."

He surprised in her face, turning swiftly towards him, an expression he did not understand. He thought he was enlightened when she spoke.

"Would she be good to Avis?" she asked.

"I think she would be good. But I have no right to ask her to be good to any one. I resented my cousin's marriage, though he pleaded with me to forgive and understand. I took it for the ordinary kind of *mésalliance.* It was not so simple as that."

"She is a young woman, isn't she? and he was an old man?"

Something trembled in her voice. It might have been anger or fear.

"There must have been forty-five years of age between them," he answered.

"Ah, then, I do not acquit her." There was a curious sound in Rose's voice. Wondering vaguely, Bretherton remembered that Rose had always been an amiable person. "I do not acquit her. Would she have married him if he had been a man of her own class?"

"I do not know. Edward Harding could only have belonged to his class."

"The price he could offer was too high. It was a mercenary marriage. No young woman honestly gives herself to an old man. It is impossible."

"You did not know my cousin."

He wondered why he was defending the marriage. He had said so often to himself the thing Rose had just said; and yet there was nothing of the woman bought and sold about the calm dignity of his cousin's widow. It was not only gratitude that made him defend her. Since he had seen her—well, it was impossible to push her to one side as a woman who had sold herself for money and position. He had an idea that money and position could not do very much for her.

"There was a lover in the background, I've heard, of her own class. There are always lovers in that class. It is only in our class, the middle-class, there are not enough men to go round."

A red spot throbbed in the ashes of Rose's cheek. In the glass which they were both facing he saw it as a dark shadow. He wondered at the asperity of her tone. Yet her speech had recalled to him the dark, handsome face of the gamekeeper and it was not a

pleasant memory. For the moment it left him with nothing to say.

"On the whole, Ralph, I would rather leave Avis to you." Rose's voice had returned to its usual gentleness. "I would rather leave Avis to you. I'm afraid she is a little too old to go to school. I have not been able to give her much education. She knows little of the things other girls know. But, on the other hand, she knows many things that do not come in the ordinary school curriculum. Of course, Adams will make it easier. Adams is as faithful as a dog to me and to Avis. The child will not need very much. She is full of imagination. She would make herself quite happy at Honeywells, as happy as she could be without me. She has depended very little on human companionship —so far. Her dogs, her books, her music, the woods; she wants no more for happiness."

"You are anticipating too much, Rose. And you ought to sit down. We can talk as well sitting as standing." With a gentle, strong force he put her into a chair. "I hope and trust you will be here to take care of Avis for many years. You are not to fret. I assume all the responsibilities. But . . . if . . . you were not to stay—do not fear for Avis. I shall do as much as a man may to fulfil your trust in me. She is an appealing child, and a very interesting one."

"Of strong affections, Ralph; don't forget that. Poor child! she has not had many friends in her short life. She is ready to be devoted to you. You won't hurt her, Ralph?—you won't fail her?"

The woman's appeal rang like a cry. There was a bitter pathos in it.

Ralph Bretherton lifted Rose's hands out of her lap, where they were clasped nervously. He noticed for the first time that they were toil-worn; Rose's poor hands that he remembered so plump and pretty and carrying a weight of sparkling rings. Cuthbert Bourne's offerings to his betrothed had had an Asiatic magnificence. He kissed them and said solemnly, still holding the hands between his own: "I promise you, Rose. And the Lord judge between thee and me."

A light broke over the sickly face.

"It is not altogether fair of me, Ralph," she sighed. "And there ought to be some one else. Cuthbert has some old aunts somewhere in Cornwall. How do I know how they would treat Avis? Perhaps a woman leaving her one precious treasure on the world need not be expected to have scruples. But oh, Ralph, God bless you! You send me on my journey with a light heart."

CHAPTER VIII

The days that followed were the strangest Bretherton had ever experienced or was likely to experience. Rose's operation took place the following morning and was pronounced entirely successful from the surgeon's point of view. But the cheerful little nurse whom Ralph interviewed had a shade over her cheerfulness. Sir Bryce Hawkins, eager to be gone to his consulting-room, about which the patients clustered thick as bees, stopped a second or two to speak to Ralph in the corridor between the two houses.

"It was a beautiful operation, my dear fellow," he said. "But—you are interested in the lady. It would not be fair to conceal from you that the shock to the system is to be feared. We must hope for the best, but—the patient was not in a very good condition to bear such a strain. If we could only tone up the human system to second our efforts surgery would be a very much simpler matter."

The day turned round slowly, in an agony of

suspense for Avis which communicated itself to Bretherton. There were moments when he felt as though Rose were really his one ship on the sea going down before his eyes. He was at the nursing-home half-a-dozen times during the day for news. The last report was that the patient was sleeping quietly. It eased the tension for them, and he went back to Lincoln's Inn to sleep like a boy with a sensation of dead-tiredness.

The morning bulletin also was favourable. He had driven up to Salamanca Road immediately after breakfast and had carried off Avis with him. She, too, had had some sleep. The evidences of it were visible in the relaxation from the tense little face of yesterday. Poor child! Poor little Avis! He noticed—with some wonder at himself, for he was not one to notice such things—that she was poorly clad, her coat too thin for the season of the year and worn at the seams.

Having received their bulletin at the nursing-home—a quite good and hopeful one which sent their spirits up amazingly—on an impulse he told the hansom-driver to take them to Regent Street.

"I am going to buy you a new coat, Avis," he said. "I am your big brother now, you know. You must help me to choose, for I

should be an awful duffer about ladies' clothes. Supposing we go to Jay's?"

"It is monstrously expensive," said Avis, beginning to colour. He did not like her the less for this evidence that at heart she was a true daughter of Eve. "And I don't think you ought to do it, really. This coat is quite serviceable. I know it's horribly ugly. But if I was to have anything it ought not to be Jay's. It ought to be—there is a place called the Stores, isn't there?"

"If there is you and I have never heard of it," he answered, with a boyish gaiety. "I have heard the ladies of my acquaintance say very nice things about Jay's. Why, you are cold, you poor little thing!"

So Jay's it was; and at Jay's, assisted by the superb-looking young woman who acted as saleswoman, Avis was clad in a most distinguished garment of grey-blue cloth, softly and richly lined. The saleswoman shook her head over Madam's hat seen in conjunction with the coat, and on her recommendation Avis was further made the possessor of a wide black velvet hat with bewitching strings to tie under the chin. She protested in a soft, low voice, but with a colour in her cheeks which showed the pleasure the beautiful things gave her. What else Ralph might have done,—for

his boyish heart had run away with his head and he could not but be aware that Avis' boots and gloves and skirts swore at the elegant coat and hat—he was suddenly pulled up by a glimpse in the distance of Lady Barton, one of his special friends, who was just rustling their way, an obsequious shop-walker preceding her. Only the intervention of the shop-walker had given them their chance of escape from Lady Barton's particularly observant eyes. A convenient cheval glass afforded Bretherton shelter without his having to make a retreat obvious to Avis and the elegant shop assistant.

Lady Barton passed on her way and Bretherton hurried to escape from the shop. What other purchases must be made he should leave to Avis herself, with the excellent Adams for escort if Rose's convalescence was too prolonged. He was suddenly aware that Ralph Bretherton, a fashionable man of thirty-six, fitting out a lovely child like Avis might present a curious aspect to a world whose very wisdom it is to think evil. Mentally he anathematized his own selfish folly in having exposed himself and Avis to a possible misconstruction. But Avis was not aware at all of the peril she had escaped. As they walked out of the shop, he wondering what would happen if Lady Barton should encounter them,

he smiled to himself observing that Avis glanced at her image in a glass as they passed with shy pleasure.

After all, though he did not know it, he brushed skirts with Lady Barton just at that moment. The lady was standing by a counter and turned about to gaze curiously after him and his companion.

"Ah!" she said to herself—"that explains it!" She had remembered that for quite a long time—a full fortnight at least—Bretherton had not presented himself at her tea-hour when he was assured of his welcome.

A fast train took them to Brighton, where they had lunch and a drive across the Downs, finishing with a stroll along the sands as the afternoon darkness was setting in and the shops in the King's Road, with the great arc lamps in front, were lit up brilliantly. They talked in a desultory fashion; he trying to keep her thoughts from the sick-room and what might be happening there; she thanking him mutely with a world of eloquence in her beautiful, innocent eyes.

It was quite dark down at the sea-front in the shadow of the sea-wall. A fresh wind had sprung up, sending the waves tumbling in to break in lines of foam along the sands. Once or twice the spray almost caught them and she

cried out, remembering her fine new garments that must not be spoilt. Once there was a bigger wave than the others and they ran for it, holding hands like a pair of children. Her little cold hand in his smote him with a pang of protecting tenderness as though she had been indeed a child. No element of sex entered into that tender feeling. Only something chivalrous and simple sprang to life in his heart. Poor little thing! Poor child! He would love to guard her from all hurt and harm.

He had had an unattached life. It was good to have something to care for, to help. There had been a little sister who had died far back in the days of his boyhood, for whom he had mourned passionately. She had been his constant companion, his little satellite, following him wherever he went, ready to do all he wished her to do, however much she might detest it herself, to essay tasks beyond her strength; anything, everything, to win his good word, to keep up with him.

Clasping Avis's chilly little hand in his it was as though Nell, dead these twenty years back, was beside him in the chilly sea-mist that was creeping up with the dying away of the wind at sunset. His hand tightened on hers with a tender proprietorship. Her foot knocked

against a projecting groyne, and she uttered a little cry of pain.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, as tenderly as though it were the little ghost of long ago.

She had struck herself rather sharply on the ankle-bone. Fortunately it was no worse than that. He found a seat and made her sit down. He had an impulse to take the poor little foot in his hand and chafe it, but he resisted it and stood by looking at her, the tenderness in his eyes hidden by the darkness while she recovered herself.

Later she wanted some sea-weed to take back to London with her. He found her a piece clinging to the sea-wall, beautiful bulbous sea-weed which she could not help bursting between her fingers. She pressed her face into it, inhaling deep, sweet breaths of the sea-fragrance as they went home in the Pullman, he pretending to read his paper in a solemn aloofness as though he were a bachelor uncle of the girl whose beauty, enhanced by the elegant setting Messrs. Jay had given it, drew most male eyes and not a few women's to follow it.

She had been all of a sudden desperately anxious to get back to London. He had meditated a more leisurely return. They should have had tea at one of the big hotels.

He enjoyed feeding her. She had a pretty, dainty way of eating; and the gaiety of the big hotels and restaurants was something entirely new to her. She was such a babe in the wood. The shaded lights, the gilding, the flowers, the music, made Fairyland to her.

But she would not wait. The chiming of four strokes on a town clock as they stood watching the foam break at their feet, had filled her with a sudden, piteous need of hurry.

"It is six hours since we heard how she was," she said. "Let us go back at once."

He satisfied her, hurrying back to the railway station as fast as they could go.

"You are not to think," she said, as they got into the Pullman; plenty of time after all, but he had hurried because he felt that she was unhappy till they were on their way—"you are not to think that it has not been lovely. If the thought of her were not always there I should have been content to go on for ever. Only—I wonder if we ought to have left, seeing how ill she really is! Supposing a message were sent for us and we were not there!"

He reminded her that there had been an excellent report that morning, so good that he had not felt justified in haunting the nursing-home as he had done yesterday. He went to

the door of the car and calling a boy with his basket of newspapers and magazines selected a lavish bundle, which he took and laid beside her. He ordered a tea-basket. A flower-girl came along the platform with a basket of flowers. He selected a bunch of the adorable little narcissi from the Riviera which prevent the spring in London in the days before Christmas. They met her eyes when she turned to the tea-basket; and she dropped the seaweed to hold the delightful harbingers of spring to her lips and her eyes. She had certainly charming ways. She had grown as naturally as a flower and as beautifully.

She made tea for both, and insisted on his enjoying his. Since he desired to please and distract her he made a feint of enjoying even the dry tea-basket cake, which forgetting to be sad she made him eat to the last crumb. She could be quietly merry with a kitten-like grace; and she commanded him with the air of a dear, much-loved child. Grim and sleepy passengers by the Pullman looked their way and smiled in spite of the aloofness and drowsiness which fall upon the Englishman as soon as he embarks on a train journey.

But in the midst of it she remembered. He had not wanted her to remember.

"Oh," she said, half under her breath, with

a soft piteousness. "I ought not to laugh indeed. How can I be so hard-hearted as to laugh? Where are we now?"

He told her. They were no more than twenty minutes' run from London. For the rest of the time her little face was rigidly controlled, as though tears might come at any moment.

She turned the pages of a magazine. He knew she was not reading it; only she had a serious politeness like an old-fashioned child's which would not distress him more than she could help. He tried to read his *Pall Mall*; but her trouble came between him and the world's news. The twenty minutes seemed endless. He found himself thinking of those who made long journeys by land and sea to a dying bed. He imagined the thud of the screw, the pulse of the flying train, the leaden hours, as one wondered and wondered if one was going to be in time.

At last—Victoria with all its lights. How glad he was! He was out of the train with all expedition and had selected with a sure eye the fastest horse on the rank, while the drivers he had passed over scowled at him. The night was coming on wet. The light from the arc-lamps and the shop-fronts turned the slanting sheets of rain to gold and silver. The wet pavements were pools of light. The

steady London crowd hurried along, umbrellaed, overcoated, with heads bent in the teeth of the wind.

At last—the lit windows of the nursing-home. He lifted her out tenderly, taking her to the shelter of the porch before he paid the cabman. When he came back the door was just opening. The maid looked curiously at them as she showed them to the parlour. The little nurse came at once with an eclipsed face.

"You have come at last," she said. "She has been asking for you so often. She is very weak."

Something in their faces told that it was a sudden calamity.

"You haven't had our telegram, then?" she asked. "We sent one as soon as ever the change set in. She thought you might be away. Come, bear up, my dear, for her sake. You mustn't fret or disturb her."

"I am all right," Avis said, with a quiet heart-brokenness. "May I see her at once? No; we had no telegram. We were out of town."

Something in the fall of her voice told Bretherton with his quickened sympathies, that that day out of town which he had planned for her distraction would remain in her mind as an indelible grief. How heedlessly the hours had

passed during which the dying woman had held death at bay so that her failing eyes might see her child once more!

"You shall see her, my dear—you shall see her at once. And Mr. Bretherton too. She has asked particularly to see Mr. Bretherton."

They went up the stairs, under the heavy atmosphere of carbolic and chloroform, through which the flowers sent a thin appeal which was scarcely discernible. Going along the corridor Avis stumbled. Bretherton put a tender arm about her and supported her. The little nurse, who had long striven to acquire the mastery over her emotions which is supposed to be the requisite of a good nurse, coming behind them wiped away a surreptitious tear. The smile came after the tear as she saw Bretherton's arm go round the girl.

"After all," she said to herself, "she won't be alone in the world. And what a lovely gentleman, to be sure!"

The little nurse read a good many novels in her off-hours. For some time to come she would endow her favourite hero with Ralph Bretherton's outward appearance.

CHAPTER IX

It was something Bretherton never forgot, the half hour or so during which he sat half concealed behind the curtain of Rose's bed, while she lay with her face turned away from him and towards her little daughter, her eyes closed, her hand clinging feebly to the child's, the darkness settling down minute by minute, the sands running out.

She had spoken only a few words—a few words—for she was very weak. Avis knelt, her face hidden, her lips on the poor, wet, piteous hand with its feebly-fluttering fingers. Once or twice the little nurse came in and stood at the foot of the bed, watching Rose's face for a second or two before going out of the room. She had whispered to Ralph that everything had been done, everything possible. Now there was only to let her die in peace. She was dying painlessly from the shock of the operation. The change had set in soon after they had called in the morning; a telegram had been sent at once and all day Rose had been

hoping for them while her strength failed. It seemed too cruel, though the little nurse rebuked him gently when he said so, the serenity of the spiritual woman shining behind her brown eyes.

"Oh, sir, everything God sends is sent in love," she said. "Only we can't understand it. God couldn't be cruel."

He envied her her consolations. Looking across now at Avis's bent head he wondered if she too had such consolations. Not a word had been said to indicate that she had any religion at all. Whatever people believed, he said to himself, they were wrong to send the young out defenceless against spiritual enemies and the common lot of suffering.

Suddenly Rose turned her head his way and her fingers groped for something. He heard his name in a faint, exhausted whisper.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, inclining his ear to her lips. The piteousness of it! This woman with the strange pallor upon her face, the difficult breathing, the closed eyes—Rose! The Rose he remembered, brown-haired, blue-eyed and buxom, with something of the wildness of her Celtic blood to lend her an added charm and difference among the shy, demure English girls. This Rose!

"When it is over take her away." She

brought out the words feebly. "Be good to her. I give her to you. I thank God who sent you to our help."

A week ago he had not known that Rose Bourne still lived. She had been an alluring memory of his boyhood; and she had married a cut-and-dried person in Cuthbert Bourne and laughed at his boyish passion. And now—for the last few days he had been absorbed in her. At this moment his heart bled for her death and the child she must leave. He had the responsibility of her child.

Rose's hand went towards the pillow, fumbled for something. Avis lifted her forlorn face and found what her mother wanted—a rosary-beads with a crucifix attached. The damp hand closed upon the crucifix. He saw the child stoop and kiss the hand and the crucifix together. He breathed a deep sigh of relief. That was much better. His poor attempts at consolation would not be needed.

He went out of the room, leaving mother and daughter together. So Rose was a Roman Catholic. He remembered now that she had always had leanings that way. He remembered how long ago her High Church proclivities had scandalized the old-fashioned folk in the Lincolnshire parish.

The little nurse met him in the corridor.

She was accompanied by a tall man in the dress of a priest, with the face of an overgrown boy and eyes of startling blueness that looked at Bretherton from behind a pair of round glasses.

The little nurse introduced them. Father Darley—Mr. Bretherton. As though she suspected that they wanted to talk she opened the door of a sitting-room for them. "This is one of our patients' rooms," she said. "It is not occupied at present. No one will disturb you here."

"Poor Mrs. Bourne has told me about your goodness, Mr. Bretherton," the priest said, eyeing him narrowly. "About little Avis. You have been very good, very generous. Not many men of your age would care to accept such a trust as Avis. Mrs. Bourne has absolute faith in you."

"I had a little sister who died a good many years ago," Bretherton said simply. "Avis recalls her to me. We shall stand in the relationship of ward and guardian. But I shall see in Avis the little sister I lost. Mrs. Bourne is justified in depending on me."

The priest's face cleared; it lost its inquisitorial expression and became frank and kind.

"I saw Mrs. Bourne before the operation," he said, "while her mind was quite clear. She told me of your extraordinary generosity to her

and Avis, that you were willing to burden yourself with the child's future. You were old friends, I understand. Not many old friends would be so generous."

"I confess I don't feel the generosity," Bretherton said, with a weary air. The death-bed he had just come from had left him with a lassitude of spirits that made him physically tired. "Perhaps you don't know the circumstances. I am practically alone in the world. A considerable inheritance which I lost some years ago—it seemed for ever—has suddenly come back to me. I had planned my life on a modest scale, putting aside the ambitions of other men. I hardly know now how to begin again. Chance—or something greater—brought me face to face with Rose just at the hour of her greatest need. A helpless woman—who might have been my wife if she would—and her helpless child. Is there anything remarkable in my standing by them? I have more money than at present I know what to do with."

"I warned Mrs. Bourne that the arrangement was somewhat unusual—a man still young, and a beautiful young girl like Avis. People might talk. You will forgive my suggesting this. Rose Bourne and little Avis are my spiritual daughters."

"I quite understand," Ralph said, with the same weary air. "Indeed, I am very glad that little Avis has a friend who can help her now as I cannot. I will tell you what I propose for Avis. For the present, at all events, I think she will be best at Honeywells in the charge of Mrs. Bourne's old servant. I propose to make Avis a sufficient allowance for her to live upon. A little later, perhaps, she will take up her musical training again. She will always have Honeywells to fall back upon."

The priest held out his hand with a frank air of relief.

"Thank you, Mr. Bretherton," he said. "You will do for Avis what I cannot do, being a poor member of an order. And you will permit me to be associated with you unofficially in your guardianship of Avis?"

Bretherton took the hand and returned its warm pressure.

"I assure you that I shall feel very happy to be associated with you, Father Darley," he said. "What am I to have charge of a girl like Avis? I should have felt my unaided responsibilities deeply. Together we shall do our best for her."

He was very glad of Father Darley's help in the days that followed when but for the spiritual comfort Avis would have been uncomforted.

There were a good many things Bretherton had to see to. The painful and dreary business of the funeral he was helped through by the priest, who officiated at the graveside in a little country cemetery within easy reach of London a few mornings later. Avis, and the elderly servant and Bretherton, were the only mourners. Immediately after the funeral was over, Avis was going down to Honeywells. Everything had been arranged for her. It was Bretherton's idea that in the country home which she loved so much there would be healing and rest for her bruised spirit.

After the funeral was over they walked across the fields to the railway station, Bretherton and the priest. Avis, with Adams, and the little new dog, which he had sent her before he knew what was coming, in her arms, had driven round the road in one of the carriages. In the winter stillness of the fields where the robins and larks were singing, it was hard to believe that London was so near; only the sides of the tree-trunks turned eastward were black with London smoke; and the grass and the hedges had a soil if one touched them from the nearness of London.

"I always think the priest's lot is the easiest after all," Father Darley said, with a sidelong look at Bretherton. "We make the great

renunciation; but we do not form these ties the snapping of which is so bitter."

It was not the first time his words had conveyed that he believed Bretherton to have been in love with Rose Bourne. A priest is surprised at nothing—he has so many strange experiences of human life—else Father Darley would have marvelled at a man like Bretherton retaining his boyish passion for poor, prematurely middle-aged Rose. It explained to the priest's mind the Quixotism of Bretherton's intentions towards Avis. Perhaps he saw a solution beyond that would be a happy one, recompensing the man for his long faithfulness, putting the girl's future beyond question.

They seemed as if they had known each other for long years instead of being new acquaintances. Of course a friendship grows in those hours of sorrow as it does not in happy days.

"You have helped Avis through wonderfully," Bretherton said. "Poor child! It was an ordeal for her. But she would come."

"She has faith and hope. It is a grateful heart. It will send out tendrils to lay hold on comfort. I always think the innocent have direct comfort from God Himself. There is nothing bitter where there is not sin."

Ralph smiled, a smile of tenderness which lit up his face.

"Even her dog was a comfort," he said. "You noticed—how she gathered the little creature up in her arms."

"Yes, I noticed. We leave them—at Victoria?"

"Yes; Mrs. Adams will look after her on the journey. I have business to attend to."

"To be sure. You have been neglecting your own business during these sad days. You will be rewarded, Mr. Bretherton. Such kindness and helpfulness as yours does not go unrewarded."

"My business this morning is to make Avis's future safe. I might die. There are many chances I have to provide against. I am settling three hundred a year upon her. She won't be able to alienate it. It is a small sum; but with Honeywells it will put her beyond the chances. Her musical education will be another matter. It may be expensive—if she goes on with it as her mother thought. She may have to go abroad. I think we might trust her to that faithful watch-dog, Mrs. Adams."

They were in sight of the railway station now. Avis sat in a corner of the waiting-room, her veil down, the little dog still in her arms. They were yet in the country. The

station was what is called a *halte* because it lacks the appanages of a railway station—a station-master, porters, and all the rest of it. There was a smoky fire in the waiting-room; on the table were a few tracts with pages torn out of them and a Bible which had evidently been handled by unclean fingers. The grate was full of the ashes and cinders of old fires. Evidently it was no one's business to sweep or dust the *halte* waiting-room.

But outside in the wide fields the larks were rising on every hand. The west wind blew, and there was a promise of spring in the air. Only one or two working-men waited at the *halte* with themselves for one of the infrequent trains.

The priest had retired to read his Office. Bretherton went up to Avis.

"Come out in the sun, you poor little soul," he said. "Lift up that heavy veil. Do you think she could be happy knowing you were in the darkness?"

He did not know how the words came. He had no experience in comforting such a sorrow, and would have anticipated nothing but a dumb helplessness if he were called upon to do so. Everything less than the strong spiritual comfort which the priest could offer seemed to him so inadequate, so dreadfully banal.

She came with him obediently as a child, putting back the clinging veil from her tense and grief-worn face. He led her to the edge of the platform from which one looked over woods and pastures as yet safe from London.

"Oh!" she said; and her face worked a little. "She loved the larks."

Then she regained a pitiful composure. The little train was in sight. Man-like, he was grateful to her that she did not cry.

CHAPTER X

At his rooms he found a letter awaiting him, with the Nunsholme postmark, in the difficult handwriting of his cousin's widow.

"Dear Sir"—it began; he smiled at the form of address—"I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you in the matter of the leese of Nightingale Farm. It has run out. Mr. Pratt, the tenant, is a very good, poor man. I think we ought to deal generously with him. I believe I would be within my strict right in giving him the leese myself; but I should like to consult you about it before writing to Mr. Vernon. I should not like to do these people a wrong.

"I am, your obedient,

"Lizzie Harding."

He smiled over the little illiteracies as he would not have done before he had seen his cousin's widow, and remembered how he had judged them that other day. After all, he said to himself, all the fine ladies did it a hundred years

ago. Indeed, there were a good many fine ladies of his acquaintance who could not be trusted to spell certain words correctly.

The plain cream-laid note-paper had a not too-deep line of black, and the address plainly printed.

"Edward, perhaps, kept her from using a crest—that common blunder of women who ought to know better," he commented in his own mind.

Turning over the sheet he saw there was a postscript.

"If you could make it conveenient to come on Thursday I should send a carriage for you to the station. You could stay the night, if conveenient."

He thought he would not stay the night. It was her simplicity that asked him; but, going down by the 1.30, he found at the luncheon table Mrs. Harding's old father and mother. They came in and sat in high-backed chairs facing each other across the table—he a tall old peasant with silvery hair, soft as a child's, above the dark eyes and the animated yet dignified face, a beard in which the black yet showed; he was the wreck of what had obviously been a man of more than usual height and strength. It was plain to see from whence his daughter had derived her height and length of limb. He

talked with a slow deliberation that did not prevent his having a good deal to say and saying it with a certain picturesqueness. He had the remains of rich colouring. Altogether a much more impressive personality than the little round-faced peasant woman his wife, who had cheeks like a winter russet and mild, faded blue eyes with which the lilac of her cap-ribbons went uncommonly well.

He was glad they were not vulgar folk.

"Father and mother came to keep me company for a while," Mrs. Harding explained in a slow, pleasant voice with rich musical notes in it. "They thought I'd be lonesome. It was very kind of them to leave their own little house where it's so comfortable."

"It's very comfortable here, Lizzie," said the old man, including Bastable in the conversation with a friendly smile. "Aren't we all friends?" Bastable bore it with a stoical air.

It would have been rather a silent luncheon-table if Bretherton had not struck up a conversation with the old man, who was very willing to talk and had a good many interesting things to tell once he was started, upon his memories of fifty years ago. He sat with his great height leaning forward, his knotted hands on the table-cloth, his knife and fork tightly clasped in them pointing upwards, while he talked of the Corn

Law days and the Chartist riots, and even burst into singing a verse of a song which chorused :

"They never can snatch
The lucifer match
From the hands of the starving poor !"

"I've seen forty stack-yards blazing in a night," he said, "and my word, but it were fine, it were !"

"How you do run on, father!" his wife remarked, gazing at him with an air of admiring tolerance.

After all, Bretherton discovered that he could stay the night. There were a good many things concerning the management of the estate which needed discussion between him and the widow, since she was good enough to consult him, and not pass him by for Freddy Vernon as she would be within her rights in doing.

They talked in the library after lunch. The December day darkened early; and Bastable came in and lit the lamps, threw another log on the fire, and drew down all the blinds. It was such a day of clinging mists and unbroken grey sky as one is glad to shut out.

There was a writing-table near the fire with various papers upon it, pens and ink, sealing wax, and a couple of candles in silver candlesticks. Bretherton sat down in a chair one side

of the hearth while the widow, seated before the table, drew the papers towards her and turned them over looking for the one she wanted. He gazed round him at the beautiful room with its rich subdued glow of colour. The books were behind brass lattices, and the gilt and tooled backs, lit by the leaping flames of the fire, sent out rays of gold into the dimness of the room. The gilt and fretted ceiling, the deep Turkey carpet underfoot, the various precious bibelots scattered here and there, the Watts portrait of Edward Harding, painted thirty-five years ago, with its elusive grace of figure, its soft brilliant colouring: the whole pleased his senses coming from the smallness and dimness of his rooms in town.

"If you will look at this, sir."

The voice of Mrs. Harding brought his thoughts back. A smile broke over his face once again. There was something quaint in her way of addressing him.

"This is Pratt's lease, sir. You see, they have been on the estate for two hundred and fifty years. They ought to have a lease that would make them safe, no matter who comes in. I'm not saying anything against you, Mr. Ralph. I'm sure you'd deal with them fairly. Only they ought to be secured before that."

Bretherton turned and looked at her with the

lazy smile which a good many women had found irresistible.

"Don't think of me in it," he said. "You'll outlive me. Possibly my son may be the one whom Pratt will need to be protected against."

She blushed hotly over the dark richness of her face and the long smooth neck which had a golden whiteness. How good she looked! What a woman, deep-chested, long-limbed, a woman to have heroic sons and clear-eyed daughters! He wondered why she blushed, whether because the speech sounded indelicate to her or for some other reason. Her next words enlightened him. He was glad it was the other reason. There was something large and simple about her that forbade the idea of prudery.

"Oh, sir," she said quietly, "as though Pratt could need protection from any of the family!"

He was grateful to her that she did not wear widow's weeds. He wondered how she had had the courage to disregard the conventions. He would have thought that with her history her veil would have been the longest and thickest, her crape the deepest, obtainable. She wore black indeed, a dense, soft black, of some clinging stuff which he did not recognize. It was crêpe-de-chine.

As though she had discovered his thoughts she said gently : "You won't be thinking ill of me, sir, that I don't wear widow's weeds? It is by Edward's wishes I go, sir. One of the last things he said to me was—' Lizzie, don't put on weeds for me. Don't add another bit of shadow to this beautiful world where already there's too much of shadow.' I'd rather have put on the weeds for him, sir, but those were his exact words and I couldn't disregard them, indeed I couldn't."

The tears rushed to her eyes—they were eyes of grey-hazel, full of deep and quiet lights and the lashes were dark like her hair. He took up the lease and read it through, giving her time to recover herself. When he looked again her eyes were bright and her face yet quivered, but she had regained her self-control.

"So far as I can see," he said, laying down the lease, "there is no reason why Pratt shouldn't have this lease renewed for all time. You know, you can give him a lease yourself for ninety-nine years."

"In ninety-nine years there would be it all to do again," she said, with a quaint seriousness.

"My dear cousin"—the words escaped his lips and it amused him to see how her eyes fell and the colour came to her cheeks—"my dear cousin, in ninety-nine years it will not be our

affair. Forgive the brutality of my reminding you."

"Ah, but—supposing, sir, some one came in that was tempted to deal unfairly by the Pratts? It would be better to guard against that, wouldn't it?"

There was something curiously gentle in the expression of her eyes, something slow and soothing in the movements of her voice. He said to himself that to be in the room with her was to breathe the air of the fields, to feel the gentle, wide silences, to hear the breathing of great, deep-chested animals in the dewy quietness. Now in her way of looking at time it seemed to him that it was her kinship with the fields and the skies and the trees that made her account a century so little to her that she must consider what might happen when the century was over.

"I am quite willing to aid and abet you in giving Pratt a lease for ever. They ought all to be fixed in their farms, so long as they are honest and industrious and pay the rent."

"Oh," she said, "I am so glad. I was afraid you wouldn't think of it in that way."

"There are the cottages at Loosestrife Corner," she went on. "Edward meant to have them pulled down and better ones put up in their stead. It's a very unhealthy place.

It's so swampy—all those water-weeds about. They always have the sore throat because of the water from the pond. They strain it through muslin before they drink it, but a deal of stuff escapes into the glass. Dr. Diver, he did say it was poison the people were drinking. Then the school-house at Somerleigh. There ought to be a new roof to it. It has been very bad this winter with the snow coming in on the floor. Why, it was bad, sir, when I was at school there. Mr. Harding, you see, was too ill to look into things. Perhaps I understand more about them because I've suffered like the rest."

"We had better go and see the places to-morrow. Of course the estate must bear the expense. Your income will do no more than keep the house going as it ought to be kept. By the way"—he had meant to write it; now for some reason it felt easy to speak. She looked magnanimous, not as though she would make his apology difficult. "By the way, Mrs. Harding, you were very generous to me. I confess I did not deserve so much generosity at your hands. You have made me ashamed."

She looked at him steadily, though her deep colour came and went.

"If you misjudged me, sir," she said, "you did no more than other people. They wronged

me and him—they thought I married him for his money. I used to be angry with you, sir, because you hurt him. But, after all, it was no more than natural to think as you did. It was very hard on you. And any harsh thoughts you had of me weren't enough to make me willing to do you an injustice. After all, what would I do with the money? I'd be as happy—aye, and happier—nursing the poor. You don't know how much nursing they need. I asked him to leave me nothing—I did, indeed—beyond providing for the old people. But he wouldn't have it. God bless him! he thought too much of me for that. He'd have the world see how he loved and respected me. But I'm sorry I must keep you out of Littlecombe Hall."

"My dear cousin," said Bretherton softly, "I don't know how to answer you. You heap coals of fire on my head. You do, indeed."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir!" she said hastily.

"Never mind. I only meant that you were too good to me. One thing, my dear cousin—I may call you that, mayn't I?—you mustn't call me 'sir,' nor 'Mr. Ralph.' It is not becoming from you to me."

"I'm very sorry." She arrested the "sir" as it was slipping from her lips. "What am I to call you, please?"

"You must call me 'Mr. Bretherton.' Perhaps some day you might call me 'Ralph' without the 'Mr.'"

"Thank you for telling me, Mr. Bretherton," she said simply. "I'm always learning. Mr. Harding was educating me. And perhaps I'll —I'll learn in time."

Old Bastable, coming into the library where Ralph sat alone at night, Mrs. Harding having retired to rest at an early hour, stood by the fire when he had replenished it and spoke with the respectful familiarity of one who had known Mr. Ralph in short frocks.

"I'm very glad to see you back again, sir," he said.

"Thank you, Bastable. I am very glad to be back again. I only wish that it was like old days, that the Squire was still with us."

Bastable shook his head slowly and sorrowfully.

"You wouldn't wish it, sir, not if you was to know how he suffered." He made a step or two towards the door, then returned. "You'll excuse me, sir," he said, "but—I'm very glad you're going to stand by Mrs. Harding. She was a good wife to the Squire, if ever woman was. He was happy with her for his wife, though he suffered. I knew no better than other people at first, sir. I never thought to

stay on after the Squire's marriage; but, sir, he thought no more of her than she deserved. You'll excuse my saying so, sir, being so attached to the family."

"It's quite right you should say it, Bastable, and it's entirely to your credit."

"And you'll be coming and going at Littlecombe Hall, sir? The hunting's better than it used to be. P'r'aps after Christmas, sir. Mrs. Harding—I don't suppose she'll hunt any more this season. But I'd like to see a bit of stir about the place. Giltraps is to let, sir, if you was to be thinking of a hunting-box."

Ah, Giltraps, with its maze of little rooms, part old, part new. Just old enough for picturesqueness and new enough for convenience. He might do worse than take Giltraps. The county would be very friendly to him. His heart lifted at the thought of the winter mornings, with the red coats showing through the leafless hedgerows, the sleek backs of the horses, the riders jogging along, the horn sounding, the hounds straining at the leash. He might do much worse than take Giltraps. He said to himself that he was a natural countryman, although for so long he had lived in London.

"I might see Mr. Drummond about Giltraps

while I am here," he said. "I wasn't thinking of hunting this year; but—thank you for reminding me of Giltraps. There is really nothing at all to keep me in London after Christmas."

CHAPTER XI

February found Bretherton in possession of Giltraps, a delightfully cheery little house, with its wide lawns and woodland path, its orchard, its pond, where an old half-rotting boat lay swaying in the bonds of the water-lily roots. It had given him a new interest, his having a house of his own. He had furnished it, was furnishing it by degrees with all manner of old things picked up at the neighbouring cottages and farmhouses. With cheerful paper on the walls, with old chintz curtains at the windows and covers on the chairs and sofas, with a good deal of cheerful white paint, Giltraps was a delightful abode. He had a couple of hunters in the stables, a trapper and an American sulky ; he confessed that motors did not attract him ; with his familiar books and pictures and bibelots from Lincoln's Inn he was delightfully at home.

He had given up his rooms in town. There was always a hotel when he wanted to stay in town. The excellent Dixon had accompanied

him to Giltraps without a murmur, producing to Bretherton's surprise a Mrs. Dixon, a tall, dark woman of the upper-servant class who had been cook in a Lincolnshire house of seventeen servants. Dixon thought that he and Mrs. Dixon could run Giltraps so far as the house was concerned. There was also a child of six, whose existence Bretherton discovered by accident. When he had got over the discovery of Dixon as a man with a wife he had said half-jocosely: "No encumbrances, Dixon, I suppose?"

To his amazement Dixon's impassive servant's face had flushed.

"I'm very sorry, sir—there's a little 'un. She won't intrude on you, of course, sir. Mrs. Dixon thought she might put her out with a cottager in the neighbourhood where we might see her sometimes, sir. There's a village handy, I daresay. She isn't over-strong, sir. London don't seem to have agreed with her. We've always wanted country for her, me and Mrs. Dixon."

"You needn't send the child to the village, Dixon. There's plenty of room at Giltraps, though it looks a little place. There'd be plenty of room for all of us."

"Oh, sir!" Dixon began to stammer. "I never thought of the like—neither did Mrs.

Dixon. You don't know the places we was turned from before I came to you, because of the kid. The very mention of her—not that we asked to have her in the house—was enough. One place where Mrs. Dixon took a job, when she asked for an evening a week to go see the kid the old lady was downright horrified, said my missus had deceived her scandalous! People do take on so about children. You don't mean it really, sir, not that we're to have her in the house with us?"

"Of course I mean it, Dixon."

"Then my missus'll be beside herself with joy. It's not so nice, if you think about it, sir, sending the kid out to places crowded up with other children and very little room for any of them. We'll try to repay you, sir, by faithful service."

Life ran very smoothly and easily at Giltraps. Mr. Trant had discovered for Ralph an excellent groom, thrown out of place by the motor craze, who knew his work and seemed to fit into the peaceful life of Giltraps. It happened to be a fine open winter, with very little frost. There was hunting three days a week, and it was seldom interfered with by the weather. Bretherton returned to the country pursuits with zest. He was really a

born countryman, and he had not been altogether content with the townsman's pursuits. He enjoyed his own comfortable, pretty, well-ordered house, his own stables, his own horses, after the many years in which he had had only a *pied-à-terre* at Lincoln's Inn and had shot other men's preserves, hunted other men's coverts, ridden other men's horses when it was not a question of a hired hack from a London livery-stable.

"It is all quite delightful," said Mrs. Trant, who had assisted the gardener's boy in pushing the Rev. Septimus in his bath-chair all the way to Giltraps to have tea with its new master. "Quite charming; but—where is the mistress? There is everything here except the one thing which would make it perfect and complete."

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Trant; the spectacle of the felicity which you give your husband set up for me long ago so high a standard of happiness in the married state that I confess it fills me with despair. I am becoming an old bachelor in sheer despair of ever attaining that ideal."

Mrs. Trant slapped him playfully on the cheek with the glove she held in her hand.

"You are no better than you were as a small boy in knickerbockers at the Vicarage when we called you 'Impudence' instead of

'Bretherton,'" she said. "Not but what I am glad to see it come back. You had grown too solemn for my taste."

Freddy Vernon, who had driven over with Mrs. Harding from Littlecombe Hall, put in a word, his eyes sparkling in his fat, dark face.

"You'll have to explain the young person I came upon trotting after you so devotedly, Bretherton," he said, "or the county will insist that you already have the possession without which Mrs. Trant thinks Giltraps incomplete."

"Don't be an ass, Vernon," Bretherton said, in a sudden rage. He did not know why he minded. It was only Vernon's way.

"Ah, Mr. Vernon means the little child belonging to your servants," said Mrs. Trant. "We are rather annoyed with you for spoiling them to the extent of letting them have the child in the house. It may give our people notions. Mrs. Lisle refused an excellent coachman the other day because, after she had engaged him, she discovered he had children. She said it was wicked of him to deceive her. He didn't grumble, poor wretch—only said in a despairing voice: 'This ain't the first place, not by many, that I've lost along of having children.'"

"A literary man of my acquaintance," put in Freddy Vernon, grinning, "has got into very

ill odour with his neighbours because his cook's little boy, with a very dirty face, follows him all over the place calling 'George! George!' as he has heard my friend's wife do. These arrangements may lead to complications."

Mr. Trant put in a word about the motor-trailer he was going to buy; and while the conversation took a new turn Bretherton glanced towards Mrs. Harding who was sitting, somewhat of an austere and lonely figure in her soft trailing blacks, a little way outside the circle. Her wide, black hat shaded the sweetness of her face. She had looked a little puzzled and vaguely distressed over Freddy Vernon's remarks. She would never learn the commonplaces of such talk; and as she sat there with something of the air of a big, beautiful child, looking from one to the other, Bretherton felt more annoyed than before with Freddy Vernon's ways. The insinuation, the chuckle, the leer in Freddy's eye; he anathematized Freddy as a little black beast who had never learnt proper respect for women.

Mrs. Harding poured out the tea, Mrs. Trant excusing herself on the ground that the rheumatism in her joints made her too clumsy to handle Ralph's old Worcester china. There was a shaded lamp on the table, for the rooms at Giltraps were low and not well-lit; and the

drawing-room was obscured by a shrubbery outside, from one of the trees of which the thrush was pouring his first spring song. Bretherton, handing the tea-cups for her, noticed her hands on which early hard work had left their mark. Sleeves of the beautiful lace which had been one of Edward Harding's hobbies hung over her hands. They were the hands of a woman who had worked hard in her time, not the soft, white hands he was used to ; and yet there was something beneficent about them—in their shape, in the way they moved among the tea-cups, ringless, the hands of a working-woman.

He had discovered by this time that she talked very little in general company. Once or twice he had encountered her as he rode home late in the afternoon after a day's hunting. He would come upon her riding by herself and would slacken his horse's pace to ride with her. He had discovered that when he could win her to talk she had things to say. Her husband had been educating her during the five years they had been together ; and he had found the soil a fruitful one, although there were arts and accomplishments she would never catch up with. But she had a fresh, intelligent mind, and she had been observing all her days. He found that there was not

much she did not know about the fields and trees, the birds and flowers ; about the lives of the class she had sprung from. All sorts of old stories and old traditions were laid away in her mind. She brought them out shyly as though they were not worth producing ; but when she found him interested she talked readily enough.

Plainly she had forgiven him. They had talked of a great lady of the neighbourhood, Mrs. Forde of Little Ashby. Mrs. Forde, meeting him one morning in the hunting-field, had made a reference to Mrs. Harding. She and Ralph were very old friends.

"I've done my best to be civil to your cousin's widow," she said. "But she simply won't respond. She don't want us, my dear Ralph ; she has no use for us. To be sure, we all treated her as a creature when she married Mr. Harding. By the time we'd discovered she wasn't a creature—imagine it, with her looks !—she had discovered that she had no use for us."

"Ah, I am sorry. I think you would have liked each other." He spoke as though he were not talking to Mrs. Forde of Little Ashby of the gipsy's daughter who had gone into a sort of domestic service and married her employer. "We were all mistaken about Mrs.

Harding. I am not sure if she forgives me, or if—she simply overlooks my former behaviour to her."

"Ah, that is it, my dear boy. She overlooks. She was quite civil to me when I called, but so unconscious that I could not make my apologies. She does a deal of good among the people about here."

He was interested. It had occurred to him to wonder how Mrs. Harding spent her time.

"She gives them what we don't—personal service. You know, we've had no nurse. Simply couldn't afford it; and if one of our poor people fell ill, if the Gaddesdon nurse couldn't be had, as she usually couldn't—Gaddesdon wants all of her it can get—he or she either died or got well. Mrs. Harding has nursed them with her own hands. You know old Weaver, who has been bedridden these many years; he was a soldier once. He has a hussy of a granddaughter who lives on his pension and neglects him. I called one day to see how the old man was. Your cousin-in-law was there. I don't know what she had not been doing for him. When I saw her she had made his bed and got him settled comfortably. The cleverness with which she moved and turned him! We couldn't do it. He was grumbling because she'd made him cold, he

said. The inhumanity of those poor! Tell her to come to see me. She's got a nurse for the district now. I'll help. We ought to have done it, we others. It is a disgrace to us that it should have been left to Mrs. Harding."

After tea Mrs. Trant would see the estate. The pale February sunshine yet lingered on the western side of the house. Freddy Vernon carried off Mrs. Trant to visit the pig. The animal, which had been introduced mainly to please Dixon, who was a born countryman and was eager for a farmery, afforded prodigious amusement to Freddy Vernon. He had a talent for humorous caricatures; and he delighted in making sketches of Bretherton and the pig.

Bretherton found himself alone with Mrs. Harding in the little walk between the holly-hedges, where the snowdrops were already gathering in thick clusters under the trees.

He remembered Mrs. Forde's message and delivered it.

"It is very kind of Mrs. Forde," she said, in her soft, deliberate way. "They should have thought of it before. The babies used to die and the mothers. My own mother died when her second baby was born because there was no nurse and no doctor nearer than Gaddesdon. The neighbour women were

kind, but they did not know much—so the mothers and babies died."

She turned her clear, somewhat mournful eyes upon him; and the simplicity of the statement made it more poignant.

"It was not right to leave them to unskilled nursing," she said. "There is an old woman with cancer at the 'Crooked Chimney.' There was no one to do anything for her but her old husband till the nurse came."

He turned and looked at her with a sharp fear in his eyes and voice.

"You wouldn't . . . think . . . of doing things for . . . a case like that?" he said; and in the light from the sinking sun he looked pale and disturbed.

"There were things I had to do for her before the nurse came," she said. "But—she is very self-reliant, old Sally Lane. I made the poultices by her directions but she would not let me apply them."

"Ah! one has to be grateful for small mercies. I wish I had the power to forbid your doing such things."

She looked at him in some wonder and he said to himself that she was positively beautiful. What if the nose were too thick to some people's minds, the mouth too large, for strict canons of beauty.

"Her brow had not the right line: leant too much,
Painters would say: they like the straight-up Greek.
This seemed bent somewhat with an invisible crown
Of martyr and saint: not such as art approves.
And how the dark, deep orbs dwelt underneath,
Looked out of such a sad, sweet heaven on me!
The lips, compressed a little, came forward too
Careful for a whole world of sin and pain."

The lines of a poem he loved drifted into his mind. Looking at her sideways, with the light on her face, he realized not for the first time that his cousin had married a beautiful woman.

CHAPTER XII

Apart from the accidental meetings, they met often by design. She was very simple, very inexperienced, apart from her natural capacity; and there were many things she wanted advice and help about, a man's advice and help. There was the whole settlement at Loosestrife Corner to be turned out-of-doors and the cottages rebuilt. There was to be a new water-supply and a new drainage. It was going to cost the estate a good deal, but the estate could bear it. There were architect's plans, builder's estimates to consider. Loosestrife Corner was the delight of artists. They were going to bring the wrath of the artists upon them. The delightful water-lilied pond, into which the graveyard up the hill out of sight drained; the picturesque gabled cottages, pressed almost to the earth under the weight of years; the old meeting-house in which Wesley had preached, with the school-house opening from it—all must go. They had to be replaced by something in which human beings could stand upright, in which the windows could open and the smoke go up the

chimney instead of about the house, in which the floors should be water-tight and have a better foundation than the naked earth. As far as possible they must replace the old lichened and ancient beauty by something which would be beautiful in time.

There was a to-do about the meeting-house, under the floors of which many dead lay in the vaults. Mrs. Harding showed a quite unexpected firmness about it. The hot, long services with all the windows shut were poisonous in such a place. The anæmic children, the sallow, unhealthy women, the beer-soaking men, the twisted and racked old people—Mrs. Harding laid them, in part, at the doors of the poisonous chapel and the poisonous school.

She tackled the Rev. Peter Jones, the pastor, who was very much opposed to the changes.

"If we cannot have the new meeting-house," she said, finally, "we shall move the whole village half a mile away. It would be much better further up the hill. It would take them away from the 'Spotted Dog' too. By and by we shall get the 'Spotted Dog' into our own hands and run it decently. If we move the village we leave only you, Mr. Jones, and the 'Spotted Dog.'"

The pastor, devoted to his people but obstinate and old-fashioned, finally yielded with a

groan. Lest he should change his mind and give more trouble the workmen began on the meeting-house. The architect, the son of a distinguished Nonconformist divine in London whose name was a shining one to the Rev. Peter Jones, had tried to convert him to the idea of something less barn-like than the ordinary chapel, but had not succeeded. The old man smelt popery in the first designs, which had to be considerably modified before he would accept them. At last he accepted a design of severe plainness which admitted plenty of light and air, as little ecclesiastical, as near a barn, as possible. "After all," said Mr. Holt, the architect, with a cheerful philosophy, "a barn need not be an unbeautiful object once it has mellowed."

The houses were going up as fast as possible. Meanwhile March set in wet and cold and the epidemics which had been hanging about Loosestrife Corner all the winter—it was never altogether free of them—became acute. There was an outbreak of diphtheria at Loosestrife Corner. The school was closed. It was usually closed about half the year which, said Mrs. Harding unsmilingly, was really the saving of the place.

The diphtheria was of a somewhat virulent order. The new nurse's time was fully

occupied with the many and constantly increasing cases. Dr. Davies, the hard-working young doctor of the district, had telegraphed all over the place for another nurse, without success so far. Meanwhile the business of birth and death went on much as usual.

Mrs. Harding had consented to be banished from the infected houses because there were other places to which she must not run the risk of carrying infection. Bretherton walking through the woods one March morning, when at last it was sunny and there was a breath of spring, saw some distance ahead of him on the grassy track a figure which even at the distance he knew to be Mrs. Harding's.

He hastened to get up with her. She had come out of a cottage which, buried in the very heart of the woods, was a long way from every place. It belonged to a carpenter on the estate, a delicate man with a young wife, pretty and fragile, whom Bretherton had occasionally seen as he walked through the wood. He had seen her about a week before washing clothes outside her door, whistling to her canary whose cage was hung in the cottage porch whenever there was a glimpse of the sun.

As he came nearer he saw that Mrs. Harding was standing resting her hand on the gate; he imagined she had an air of being overwhelmed

with some misfortune. He came quickly to her side.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I thought at first, when you were far away, that you were Mercer," she said. "Of course, when you came nearer I saw I had made a mistake. I have to tell him—what has happened in there. I must wait till he comes. The doctor has just gone. There is nothing more to be done."

"What is it?" he asked again. A profound compassion for the drawn whiteness of her face had almost made him add "dear." But he pulled himself up in time. "Mercer's wife . . .? That poor, pretty thing?"

"She died an hour ago. The doctor had sent him over to Gaddesdon for some things. He ought to be back soon. Ah—I must go back and comfort the baby."

He was aware of the thin, fretful crying of a young baby which had burst out while they spoke. She turned away to pass through the gate; but he followed her.

"Don't come in," she said. "It is too sad. Her life might have been saved if the doctor could have got here in time. He is run off his feet. There was no nurse—her hands are full—only a stupid, ignorant old woman."

Her eyes seemed to him to hold a mournful

accusation, as though the class she was born in stood up and testified against his class. The poor, pretty young wife! And poor Mercer! The poor—God help them!—had to bear such things. The wives of such men as he had all that skill and science could do to help them in their hour of need. For want of such help a poor man's wife must be sacrificed.

"I am coming with you," he said, almost brusquely. "I am not going to let you bear it alone."

She said nothing, only preceded him into the cottage with a hanging head.

It was one of the picturesque cottages, not so bad as the old ones but admitting very little air and light. Though life depended on it you could get no more air than came through one little square of the diamond-paned windows which opened inwards. The lower room was very dark, must have been darker when the leaves were on the trees. Bretherton could see nothing on his first entry into the cottage, dazzled from the sunshine outside.

Presently he saw. On a bed in the corner of the room lay a quiet form. A white sheet had been drawn over it and up to the chin. The face lay on the pillow with closed eyes, the pretty outline of cheek and chin, the little nose sharp against the window-light. He looked

closer. The young lips smiled, as though they held a secret. There was no trace at all of anguish. Some one had smoothed the pillows and drawn back the fair hair, laying it in two long strands by the side of the cheeks. He could hardly believe her to be dead. The colour had not yet quite fled from the cheeks. There was no rigidity in the lines beneath the bed-clothes. He could have thought she slept.

Turning about he was aware that the canary was singing gleefully against the crying of the new-born babe. Mrs. Harding had taken the child from the arms of the old woman who was the other occupant of the room.

"There! there!" she said, holding it to a maternal breast. He watched her feed it, just a drop or two of something which was in a cup on the table. The old woman took the canary's cage down from its hook and went away with it into another room, closing the door behind her.

The thin, scrawny wails of the baby subsided. Mrs. Harding stood up, rocking it gently to and fro in her arms. He looked at her, the soft flowing lines of her figure, her tender gaze, the evident skill with which she soothed the baby. There was the beauty of motherhood in the little group of woman and child.

As he stood watching her with a reverent gaze, as though he looked on something holy, the

garden-gate clicked. His Madonna turned and looked at him, a sudden terror blotting her air of benignant calm.

"He doesn't know," she said piteously. "He mustn't come in here without knowing."

She moved a step or two towards the door; but Bretherton was there before her.

"I will do it," he said. "Why should you have all the painful things?"

He moved out into the sunlight, closing the door behind him and her. Mercer was coming down the path, a drooped, weedy figure, its shoulders bent as under a perpetual burden. He was not alone. There was a little old woman with him, a decent body, with rosy apple cheeks and bright eyes, now somewhat tearful. She had hold of the man's arm. As he came he walked so heavily that he seemed to stumble.

The man lifted his head and a dull recognition came into his eyes.

"I'm to be pitied, sir, aren't I? What am I going to do without her? A young baby too!"

The little old woman helped him on towards the door.

"You have me, George," she said, "as long as you want me. I'm not a-past my work yet. And I always had a way with babies. It was given in to me that I had."

No two people, one would have said, could have been more unlike Mercer and his mother; yet there was a likeness between them as she stood holding her son's arm.

"The doctor told us, sir," she went on. "Poor George had come for me. 'Mother,' he says, 'Lucy's took mortal bad, and none with her but Mrs. Harding and old Granny Sykes.' I just put on my bonnet and I came."

They went into the cottage. Standing in the porch beyond the open door Bretherton saw Mrs. Harding put the sleeping baby into the father's arms. He stood looking down at it, dazed. The old woman was taking off her bonnet and cloak.

He walked away towards the garden-gate and waited outside in the lane. He had not long to wait. Presently he heard again the click of the garden-gate, and, looking up, he saw her coming towards him. She looked chill and forlorn in her black attire. Usually she had such a warm, healthy colour that she could bear the blacks; but now she looked frozen, inconsolable.

They walked along for a while in silence. He noticed that she was trembling. They were in a glade of the wood where the trees had been thinned. A number of the felled trees lay on either side of the grassy path. He made her sit down and suddenly she covered her face

with her hands; her shoulders began to heave quietly. She wept very quietly but it seemed very deeply. He saw the tears run through her fingers and drop on to her lap.

He waited, looking down at her. Her position showed him the smooth coils of her beautiful midnight hair where it lay on her neck. He wanted to comfort her, but he did not know how to set about it. Once or twice he put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Dear!" he said, and again, "dear!" Something, glimmering pale-yellow, caught his gaze between the felled tree-trunks—the first primrose of the year. He stooped and picked it and laid it in her lap.

Presently she recovered herself and after a little while ventured to look at him. She had taken the primrose between her fingers and was looking at it with something of pleasure in her wet eyes.

"I had to cry," she said simply. "I've been through a lot."

"I know. Why shouldn't you cry? It has done you good."

"You are very kind," she said, turning away her head. "Men don't like women to cry. They think it's foolish nonsense. I don't see why you should be so kind and look so sorry."

"I'm not adamant, though I am a man."

"Oh," she said; "you mean a heart of iron. My husband explained that to me. I used to read for him; and when we came to a word I didn't understand he always explained it. He took a deal of trouble over me in those five years."

She looked up at him from under the shadow of her big hat. Against its dark background the line of her cheek and throat were tender and spiritual.

"You are very kind to me," she said. "I am glad you are kind. So would Edward have been. He always wanted us to be friends. I didn't mind about the others," she went on drearily. "The ladies weren't kind at first, though the gentlemen were. Afterwards, when they would have been kind, I didn't seem to care about it. I remembered how they did not see me, even ladies I'd been introduced to in the hunting-field. Once there was a sale of work at the Duchess of Frensham's"—she broke off abruptly. "Never mind," she said; "it was only that they didn't understand about my marriage. Of course it seemed bad to them. They couldn't know, could they?"

"No; I suppose they couldn't."

She looked up at him with a sudden shrewdness.

"You are wondering what it was they did

not know, Cousin Ralph," she said. "Well, I will tell you. It was why I married Edward, and he me. You see, I used to do everything for him, Cousin Ralph." Her cheeks were suddenly suffused with colour. "Well, I grew fond of him. I could not help it? The men I'd been born and brought up among were very well in their way; they weren't like him; I needn't tell you."

"No." He remembered Edward Harding, a beautiful old man, whose heart was so young. He remembered to have heard it said of his cousin that his great fault lay in his desire to please every one. The speaker had said it with an insular hatred of fine manners, making the charge acrimonious.

"He married me because I was fond of him," she said, her colour coming and going, while her eyes kept their brave, direct glance. "I never meant to let him know. As for marrying him, I never thought of such a thing. I was content to wait on him and do his bidding and be always with him. Perhaps he'd never have known if he hadn't spoken to me for . . . some one else. He'd promised . . . some one else . . . he'd speak for him. When he did that I couldn't bear it and I began to cry. 'What is it, Lizzie?' he asked; and he coaxed it out of me that I was heart-broken to think of

him doing it and that I could never think of leaving him. That's how it came about, Cousin Ralph. He never meant to do you any wrong, nor I either. It was more than ever I expected that he should make me his wife. I was happy doing everything for him to the end."

For a few seconds there was silence between them. Then she spoke again.

"You'll be marrying one of these days," she said. "When you marry—I'd like, if it wasn't going against him, to give up Littlecombe to you. Do you think it would be going against him?"

Bretherton put a hand, lightly caressing, on her arm.

"My dear cousin," he said, "I know it is something I could not take from you; and I think it would be going against him. I have no thought of marrying. If I had, there are other houses besides Littlecombe. And—please let me thank you for telling me so much. I must tell you how much I respect, how much I value such a confidence."

He stooped and took the hands lying in her lap into his, held them a second against his breast and then raised them to his lips.

"Believe me," he said, "that I am very glad Edward Harding had such happiness at last."

Her eyes, uplifted to his, were like wells of

clear water. A good woman and Nature's lady. No woman could be more than that. A second he held her hands in his, then laid them gently back again in her lap.

A rustling of the undergrowth near them passed for no more than the movement of a rabbit or a squirrel in the woods.

"Edward always wanted you and me to be friends, Cousin Ralph," she said. "I can't help thinking he'd be happier if he knew and hoping that he does know."

CHAPTER XIII

He carried the remembrance of Lizzie Harding's sweet and serious personality with him next day when he went on one of his occasional visits into Surrey to see how things fared with his ward. How he had misjudged her! Her gentleness, her dignity, her transparent truth and honesty were in his mind as the train ran along by the back gardens of suburban London before getting out into green country. More than that. Some of her physical attributes were in his mind. She had a beautiful rounded figure, and her movements were very graceful. Her hair, parted in the centre, waved lightly on either side its division; behind the ears the wave was as beautiful as the convolutions of a shell.

To think that Edward Harding had picked her up out of the rough and hard life which she would have had to endure if she remained in her own class! He remembered the figure beneath the sheet in the carpenter's cottage yesterday. He thought of the women at

the cottage-doors and in the fields, old before their time with hard work and the bearing and rearing of children. Some of the peasant women he remembered, were not without nobility of look, without the remains of beauty under their roughened and coarsened exteriors. But not a woman of the class he had ever known had not looked her age, had not looked years older than a woman who had been tenderly cared for.

He pondered upon Lizzie's curious revelation about her feeling for Edward Harding. He remembered her face when she had told him. Well, he was very glad to have that rehabilitation of her. Any woman might have been dazzled by Edward, the finest of fine gentlemen; and she had had the wit and the imagination to be overwhelmed by the difference between him and the men of the class to which she belonged. But—love. That was not love in her calm and tender gaze; at least, not the love she thought it was; not the love between men and women, the one love. All else she might have had for Edward Harding, but not that. There was yet something of the sleeping goddess about her calm beauty. He said to himself, with a half-guilty feeling, that love had yet to be awakened in Lizzie Harding's heart.

He had been very faithful in his visits to

Avis Bourne. Once or twice he and Father Darley had been to see her together. More often he had gone alone. She had always seemed very glad to see him, showing her pleasure in his coming as frankly as a child. He had usually come for lunch and left some time in the afternoon, spending two or three hours with Avis; and the time had never lagged. Avis had quaintness and originality unspoilt by the education which often levels up or levels down the nature else original. She had an evident affection for and belief in himself which he would have been more or less of a man than he was not to respond to. When they went for their country walks together, climbing the hill over the beautiful valley through the woods which in this winter season they had pretty well to themselves, she would chatter to him, full of a happy and cheerful confidence, her two hands clasped about his arm as though she had known and trusted him for years. They were very pleasant visits. In his thoughts of them Honeywells was always suffused with full sunshine. Often it had not been so, he knew, but then the roaring fires in the bright, simply furnished rooms had taken the place of sunshine. Avis's openly expressed delight at seeing him had doubtless made for him a mental sunshine.

There are some natures with which to give

is to expand the heart, to cause it to overflow on the recipient of its bounties. Such a nature was Bretherton's. It warmed him through and through to think how he had been enabled to save little Avis from the wretched life that would else have been hers. There was no talk yet of the musical education for her; but it was to come. Avis, after all, was not yet nineteen. After the London life she hated she seemed to rest in the quiet country life as on a bed. By and by, when she had well rested, it would be time enough to talk about her musical education. Her guardian, as he called himself, was in no hurry to bid her be stirring. She sang for him as much as he would when he paid those visits, filling the house with the honeyed sweetness of her rich young voice.

Father Darley was the one who had urged that Avis had had enough of lotus-eating, watching Ralph the while shrewdly out of the eyes which had so intimate a knowledge of the hidden heart of man.

"You don't mean to keep her a Sleeping Beauty all her days, my dear fellow," he had said to Bretherton the last time they had met.

"I! Oh—it rests with herself. When she is ready for the career I shall do my best for her. She doesn't seem to want to talk about it much. She seems very happy with her dog

and her flowers and books. Why should we trouble her—yet?"

"Because she is too solitary. The solitary life breeds discontent and an unwholesome inertia. She ought to have friends. How is it she has none?"

"Because she will have none. Her first visitors alarmed her, Mrs. Adams tells me. They asked her so many questions. The good woman was so indignant about it that she was quite ready with her 'not at home' to future callers. By degrees the callers have given her up. I believe Mrs. Daubeny, the Vicar's wife, made her way in and rated Avis half-humorously for not appearing at the parish church. I have seen Mrs. Daubeny, though I have not spoken to her. She is no bigot, I think, and of course she did not know that Avis was a Catholic. You might take her for a drab person if you were insensible to the glint in her eye and the jest that hides at the corners of her demure mouth. I'm sorry Avis wouldn't make a friend of Mrs. Daubeny. But, as a matter of fact, she has had a bad time. I think she has not quite recovered yet. She leads a most healthy life, always out-of-doors. Let her be, most excellent spiritual father."

Father Darley had laughed.

"As you will," he said. "After all, you

have a right to be heard. Only—Avis will listen to you. Has it not struck you that she will not listen to many people? Don't let her go on leading an aimless life till she wakes up some day and discovers that she is not fit for any other."

"At nineteen! Are you not looking a long way ahead?"

"They are the seeding years. I stick to it that she is too solitary. With another kind of life she might marry and marry well. She is a charming child. Marriage is better for a woman than a career."

Again the shrewd kindly eyes had narrowed themselves, dwelling on Bretherton's face.

"Oh, marriage! We needn't think of that yet, either. What an odd thing it is that you celibates are so fond of prescribing matrimony for other people!"

With that they had been on the edge of parting, but the priest had turned back to say:

"Let me know when you are running down to Honeywells next and I will see if I can accompany you."

It happened to be Lent now and Bretherton had gathered from the newspapers that Father Darley was preaching a course of sermons at Forest Street; he had said to himself that it was of no use to ask the priest's company,

pleasant as it would have been. So he had not troubled the busy man with an intimation which would have entailed an answering letter.

It was a mild, sweet February day; and now that the train had left London behind and was running through one of the sweetest of Surrey valleys Bretherton's mind became attuned to a placid content. The pastures, flooded with the early sun, were full of bleating sheep and lambs. The thrushes were singing sweetly in the bare coppices; and overhead there was the dappled sky of February, full of broken lights, little hints of gold amid the grey. It was going to be a pleasant day. Mrs. Adams was an excellent cook and knew how to serve a dainty meal with anybody; perhaps if she had not been Bretherton might have overlooked it, sitting with Avis in the pleasant room to a dainty luncheon-table which he felt sure the girl's own hands had decked and made charming.

He cast his eye lazily to the hill which had just come into view. He wondered if he would have the energy to climb it with Avis after lunch, to survey from its summit the many counties it overlooked before coming back to tea and the walk to the railway station in the dusk when the blackbirds sang their sweetest.

Now they were running into the little railway station. He had forbidden Avis to meet

him there. She had come once and it had been borne in upon him that it made people smile at each other to see her eager greeting. A carriage-full of women had passed them by as they walked, Avis with a hand through his arm, her hair blown about her face by the wind as she laughed and chattered in his ear. She was so unconscious that the world might have only held her and himself. But he had been aware of the interested glances of the occupants of the carriage. Although he missed something in not finding Avis looking eagerly from one window of the train to the other for his face and in the pleasant walk to Honeywells which went straight through the heart of a wood, he had not allowed her to meet him since; and she had obeyed him without hesitation, like a dear, tractable child.

Mrs. Adams would wait on them at lunch and beam soberly at them as though they were both her children. The woman had conceived an inordinate admiration for Bretherton. Some of her sayings concerning him were gaily retailed to him by Avis from time to time. He had said that any mere mortal must be embarrassed by having such attributes given to him; the pedestal on which the good woman had placed him was a giddy one indeed. Repeating Adams's praises Avis had

a merry malice which made her prettier than ever. The last time Bretherton had been with her she had laughed and mocked at him delicately till he and she were in the highest good spirits.

Springing out of the slow train with a joyous anticipation in his face and mind of the walk through the wood and the few hours with Avis, he was unpleasantly pulled up by a familiar voice shouting his name. He was slapped on the back. He hated to be slapped on the back. Freddy Vernon! Confound Vernon! why must he turn up just now?

He faced round about, his expression suddenly morose.

"Ah, Vernon!" he said.

"You don't seem a bit glad to see me, old chap. We came down by the same train. Caught sight of you at Victoria, just as you left the bookstall with half the stall under your arm. I say—you do go in for light literature. By the way, allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. James Douglas. Can we give you a lift? We're on our way to the Vicarage. Daubeny used to coach me. He's coaching Jim now. I know every inch of the place about here."

Bretherton nodded to the freckled, plain-looking, yet attractive boy in shabby homespuns,

who was looking at him out of honest grey eyes with perhaps more interest than the object of it could well account for. He was most uneasily conscious of the nature of the bundle he had taken from the bookstall—*The Queen*, the *Lady's Realm*, the *Ladies' Field*. No one could suppose he was interested in these, nor for the matter of that in the half-dozen story-magazines which went with them. Also there was a very big box bearing the magic name of Fuller companioning the magazines. Bretherton wished he had got them to pack it up; but there it was, the name full in view; and Vernon's beady black eyes—confound them!—had taken in the full significance of the name.

"No, thank you," Bretherton said somewhat ungraciously. "I prefer to walk. After that confoundedly slow train. . . ."

"Yes, didn't it crawl? There are better ones in the afternoon."

"Too late for me. I've got to go back this evening—the 6.15. I've to see a ward of mine."

To his annoyance he felt that he looked embarrassed and that Vernon was eyeing him with a steadily growing amusement. The angry colour mounted to his forehead. What the deuce did Vernon mean by looking at him like that?

"Ah! I'm sorry we can't travel together. A delightful spot, isn't it? Ideal for love-making or a honeymoon. I always tear myself away with difficulty. You won't take a seat? No? Ah, well—perhaps it's just as well. This youngster's legs take up a lot of room. And we can't depend on the pony. The pony will go or not, just as he pleases. If you're bound to get an afternoon train I don't know but that you're better advised to walk."

They parted with a curt nod on Bretherton's side. He set off walking very fast. The pony was hard to get off. By the time he had been induced to move and had got well under weigh, Bretherton was out of sight.

"An unsociable fellow—don't you think?" Mr. Vernon said, taking a cigarette out of his case and proceeding to light it. "Or is it only that he is not keen for our company? He seems to be a very kind guardian, don't you think, youngster? All those sweets now, I should think, wouldn't be very good for a child."

"It isn't a child," said the youth laconically, staring between the pony's ears. "And—I say, Vernon, you do talk a lot of rot, you know."

"I forgot, after all," Mr. Vernon replied, taking no more notice of his companion's

rudeness than to push his long legs unceremoniously out of his way, "to ask him about the lovely widow. Some fellows get all the chances, don't you think, Douglas? You don't think about it—eh! Well, you know, you are a queer youngster."

CHAPTER XIV

Avis, in a frock of dull green which brought out the reddish shades of her hair, a fichu of embroidered muslin about her shoulders, was a pleasing sight as she ran out to meet Bretherton, taking from him the incriminating sweets and papers with the air of one who is never found fault with.

"You're late, aren't you?" she asked. "At least, it seems ages since I saw through that opening in the trees over there the smoke of your train as it went on after leaving you."

He smiled at the pretty, unconscious flattery, while he replied that the train was in very good time—for that train.

They went round the corner of the house in sight of the barred kitchen windows, behind which Mrs. Adams was rolling her puff pastry, the little dog fawning on Bretherton, the girl clinging affectionately to his arm. The woman in the kitchen nodded to herself with an air of great satisfaction as she saw them pass. They went on down the garden. There were a few violets out here and there under the leaves.

The primulas were shaking out their heliotrope frills with a demure daintiness. Snowdrops were up in profusion, with many crocuses.

Avis made a little bunch of the violets and put them in Bretherton's coat. She was quite unaware of the butcher's young man who had gone to the kitchen door of Honeywells for orders and had her well in view. As she pinned the violets in the lapel of the coat her face was very near Bretherton's. He noted as he might with a child the fine, delicate beauty of her skin, the clear brilliance of the colour, more marked than it had been in the sad London days, the upward tilt of the little white nose, how the thick, long lashes fell over the eyes of forget-me-not blue, seeming to cast a shadow on the pure transparency of the cheek.

"Pretty thing!" he said to himself as the wind caught and lifted her hair and sent a strand of it floating across his face. "Pretty thing!"

There was no more consciousness of sex in his feeling than if she had been seven years old, the age of the little sister when she yielded up her innocent life; but the attitude was quite open to misconstruction—by the butcher's boy, for example; or by Mrs. Adams, who had for once been false to all her traditions, running away from her puff-paste to peep through the

muslin short blind of her bedroom window which overlooked the garden.

It was certainly beautifully warm—almost sultry—for February. They had the dining-room windows open while they sat at lunch; and a bee came in and buzzed about the room as though it had been June and not February. Avis had had a letter from Father Darley. He had asked her in the course of it if she had given up her thoughts of a musical career.

"Dear old Daddy Darley," she said. "I believe he wants me to be a nun, like Sister Angela at the Sacre-Coeur, who was always urging on me that I should give my voice to God."

Nothing could have been less true of the priest; but Mrs. Adams, who was handing round the dishes, looked baleful for a second and her lips tightened. She was the narrowest of Evangelicals, although her love for her late mistress had withstood the shock of her change of religion, although she kept troth with Rose Bourne by taking Avis to Mass every Sunday across the three miles of hill and woodland to Shepherdwell, a loyalty that cost her dear. Father Darley had a very high opinion of Adams, with a humorous appreciation of the fact that Adams believed him destined for eternal torments and also believed that short of

converting her his dearest wish would be to burn her as a heretic. Adams's eyes glowed and her face was full of narrow suspicion as the girl went on with a playful story of how Sister Angela had striven to implant a conventual vocation upon her.

Despite that absence from the puff-pastry, which denoted much disturbance of mind, Adams had excelled herself in the lunch. Down to the black coffee it was perfection; and it left Bretherton in a very well-contented frame of mind. He would have been quite well content, indeed, to stay and smoke in one of the comfortable chairs in the verandah that ran along the south side of Honeywells trapping all the sun, the little dog lying at his feet, Avis so close to him that he could have pulled out one of the long curls, which had a way of getting into an admired disorder, and let it fly back again to its curl. Avis would wait on him hand and foot so far as he would let her. He was moved at last to protest.

"Don't, little girl, don't!" he said, in a voice of lazy content. "Don't turn Honeywells into a Capua lest I should be enervated."

A little later he got up and shook himself, took his hat and stick while Mick the Aberdeen yelped and leaped about him and announced that he was ready for a walk.

They went up the usual way through the pine-woods towards the crest of the hill. They went easily, sitting down on half a dozen stiles, forgetting perhaps that they had delayed to start. At the last stile, before they reached the winding road that brought them easily to the top of the hill, they paused while he told her about Lizzie Harding, about the scene in the carpenter's cottage, about her generosity, her unworldliness, how she had forgiven him his too ready condemnation of her, how she had made him feel for ever humble and contrite towards her.

He was sitting on the stile, Avis standing beside him. The wood was very dark. They had not noticed how the sunshine had died away. It was always more or less dark in the pinewood.

He was suddenly pulled up short in his passionate panegyric by a sense of coldness, of unresponsiveness in the atmosphere. He glanced at Avis, feeling suddenly chilled. She was frowning. She had straight dark brows in striking contrast to the chestnut tints of her hair. Now they were drawn in a severe, unfriendly line.

"Let us go on, Avis," he said, his mood suddenly tumbling down to earth. "I believe it is going to rain. How dark it has become!"

"It is only the shadow of the woods," she said; and her voice was sullen.

What was the matter with the child? He had been sure of her sympathy, or he would not have spoken so plainly. Although he had known so many girls and known what it was to see them blush or grow pale when he came, there was something simple and manly in him that prevented his diagnosis of Avis's case as jealousy. There had never been any consciousness in their relations with each other. He said to himself that they were like bachelor uncle and niece. Well, well! Avis didn't like his having other friends; that was plain. He had so little consciousness that he was disappointed in her for what he thought a littleness.

Out on the road she threw off whatever thing had been oppressing her, and, catching his hand in sudden gaiety, she made him run while he implored her to have pity on his middle age and his infirmity. He made the plea with humorous gaiety. There was nothing of middle age, less of infirmity about his lean, well-set-up figure, the long stride in walking which exacted a good walker as a companion.

Between the hill and the pine-woods the road ran in deep shadow. At one side was a row of very ancient trees. Their roots were in the high banks by the side of the road,

flung into all manner of strange and horrible contortions.

"Lost souls," said Avis, suddenly grave. "Look at the anguish of those twisted things."

She had forgotten her momentary vexation. Now they had reached the gate at the end of the avenue of trees beyond which lay Coldblow, the village amid the pines, which one might have come upon somewhere in the Alps.

"It really has darkened," she said, looking up.

The sky, which had been so radiant when they started, was now covered by a bank of ominous clouds.

"We had better get back as fast as we can," Bretherton said, "or we shall be wet through. Luckily it is all downhill."

"You don't think we ought to shelter at the inn?"

He glanced towards the hanging inn-sign of "The Three Travellers" and shook his head. "We shall have to hurry back. I'd no idea it was so late. You make time fly, Avis."

"It hasn't been as pleasant as usual," the girl said, frowning a little. "And now you have to hurry. Can't you go by a later train?"

He shook his head. He preferred to take a daylight train back to town. Not for worlds

would he have told her that people might talk if they were not circumspect. He hated the idea himself. He had somewhat cloaked the situation to his own mind, saying to himself that a guardian had a perfect right to visit his ward and that he was certainly come to years of discretion. But at the back of his mind he knew that the world, that evil-speaking, evil-thinking thing, was not always ready to accept a perfectly honest and open situation. He would have despised himself if he, thirty-six years old and a man of the world, had not been careful for the child.

"I'm afraid I shan't even be able to wait for tea," he said. "You should not have beguiled the time as you have done, little one."

"And you won't come again for ever so long," she fretted.

He could not tell her that he must not come as much as he wanted to lest people should talk; that she was a Barbara in her tower, a Deirdre in her castle; that the world exacts circumspection of every young woman living alone and, as the phrase goes, unprotected.

He was more willing to go than usual, for she had disappointed him. He had thought to bring her and Lizzie Harding together. Half a dozen times it had been on his lips to

bespeak the friendship of his cousin's widow for the orphan girl he had befriended. Now he said to himself, remembering the tightening of the girl's lips, the gloom of her brow, that it was as well he had not spoken. He had an idea that Avis could be obstinate if she chose. He liked a woman to be gentle and pliable—to the right person. He remembered the expression of Lizzie Harding's eyes lifted to his as she told him the truth about her marriage. He said to himself that there was only whiteness and light behind those eyes; no anger, no resentments, only an immense placidity, a serenity of one who regards large and simple issues.

The pine-wood was suddenly lit up and there came immediately the roar and rattle of thunder. Avis cried out in sharp terror. After the flash the wood seemed darker than before. There was going to be a big storm.

They were close upon a clearing in the midst of which was a chalk-pit. It was fortunate they were so near, for the wood with its dense trees was no safe place in a thunderstorm. There was some sort of a shed in the chalk-pit; there would be shelter there.

"We must run before the next flash," he said; but while he spoke the wood was again lit from end to end, and the thunder ripped the

sky above them with a tearing and crashing sound.

Avis was pitiably frightened. He had almost to carry her the short distance that separated them from shelter. They found the door of the shed open. At one end of it there was a cow with a calf. The other end was filled with planks and sacking and a miscellaneous collection of rubbish.

He was amazed and grieved at Avis's terror. It was his first experience of her in a thunderstorm; among the things she had imparted to him concerning herself her terror of lightning was not one.

They stood together in the darkness of the shed, lit up every minute or two with the blue glare of the lightning. He tried to make her sit down, but she would not. She clung to him, hiding her eyes against his sleeve. He was profoundly sorry for her terror, as sorry as though she had been a child.

"There, dear, there!" he said, comforting her.

There was another flash and she screamed. He put his arms about her and hid her eyes on his breast. His hands went smoothing the roughened curls of her hair, for her hat had fallen back and hung by its strings, with tender, anxious kindness. He kept assuring

her that it would soon be over now, that the sky was lifting. She never heard him, but only clung to him more frantically as the thunder pealed and reverberated overhead.

Suddenly, in the almost midnight blackness, some one else sought refuge in the shed. The new arrival was Mr. Daubeny the Vicar, wet through, for the rain had begun now and was coming down in sheets. The next flash of lightning revealed his handsome, high-coloured, Scottish face, with the kindly eyes under the bushy white eyebrows.

"So sorry," he said awkwardly. "I'm afraid I shall have to stay."

Bretherton felt himself blushing. He did not in the least know who the person was who had surprised him with Avis in his arms. Of course the man had misunderstood. How could he help it? But he was furious with the misunderstanding all the same.

"Not at all," he said stiffly. "You have as much right here as we have. This young lady is unfortunately desperately afraid of lightning. It is a terrible storm. Avis, Avis, my dear . . ."

It was some seconds before he could make Avis understand; but he succeeded at last to the extent of making her lift her head to look at Mr. Daubeny.

"Oh, it is Miss Bourne," the good gentleman said with manifest surprise.

Avis, with a sort of inarticulate sob, had turned her face to the wall, seeing that she no longer had the shelter of Bretherton's arms. Mr. Daubeny came and took her hand and tried to comfort her, but she snatched it away covering her face and stood shaking and sobbing while the two men talked uncomfortably.

At last it was over, though the rain still continued. Mr. Daubeny, saying something about his wife's alarm at his absence, shook himself and prepared to go.

"I'm afraid we'll get wet," he said; and his look at Avis, though he did not intend it, had something of significance. So they walked down the hill together, through wet vegetation to their knees, Avis still scared-looking but recovered from the panic now that the sky was really lifting, showing through a rift in the clouds the evening star.

She had come to herself sufficiently to introduce the two men. They discovered a mutual acquaintance in Freddy Vernon, who was staying at the Vicarage. The Vicar was nothing if not hospitable.

"You can't possibly go back to town in those clothes," he said. "Why, you'd be wet through, man, before you could reach the

station. Come home with me and I'll give you a bed for the night."

Bretherton thanked him and declined. He felt intolerably chafed and fretted over the whole incident. The significance of the Vicar's manner had not been lost on him. The good gentleman himself had only meant an act of Christian kindness. He had a girl of his own about Avis's age. He said to himself that he was very glad it was he who had come upon that scene in the cattle-shed. What might not have been made of it if the wrong person had happened to appear there as he had done? In his own mind he was a little bitter against Bretherton. The man ought to know better. It was so easy to smirch a girl's name. Of course it was awkward. One must not expect too much of human nature. If a pretty girl in a panic of fear flings herself into a man's arms not one in a hundred perhaps could be expected to do anything but console her in the orthodox way. Still, Bretherton ought to have known better. If he had not brought the pair with him they might have been there yet, not realising how pretty a scandal the wrong person might have made of it.

So thought the kindly, tolerant, wise old man. But Bretherton, unfortunately, had misread the significance. He had resented the little touch

of force which had been in the parson's suggestion that they should come with him. As though he were not as careful of the child as any parson could be.

He answered therefore in a chilly voice that he was only very slightly wet and never took cold.

They parted company with the Vicar at the gate of Honeywells.

"I shall just have time to see you to the house," he said to Avis, in the Vicar's hearing.

"If you will not stay for a later train," she said, "don't mind. It is only a few yards to the house."

The Vicar left them to settle it. He had done, as he conceived, his duty in chaperoning the pair. Now with Avis at her own door his responsibility was at an end. He had not really misjudged Bretherton at all; he was quite an unconventional person himself and allowed his own girls a latitude which often shocked the maiden ladies of the parish, who were many and censorious.

He had not gone very far when he heard the whistle of the train close at hand.

"Ah," he said to himself, "our friend will have lost his train unless he has made haste."

And so dismissed the matter of the meeting from his mind.

CHAPTER XV

BRETHERTON had not delayed over his farewells, but after rejecting with a slight brusqueness Mrs. Adams's suggestion that he should come in and get dried, had gone, running at the top of his speed to the station. But despite the speed he arrived only just in time to see the train puff its way out of the station. It wanted four hours to the next train; and he was suddenly aware that the evening had turned cold and that he was shivering in his wet garments.

At thirty-six one is not as careless as one is at twenty; and for some reason or other life had suddenly become extraordinarily interesting to the man who for some years had been taking a rather jaded view of it. He remembered about a quarter of a mile down the road a little inn, the red blinds of which when he passed by had sent a cheerful glow into the night. He wondered if they could give him some food while his clothes dried. After all, it was a good thing he had not caught the train. The

water squished in his boots as he walked. He would certainly have been laid up if he had had to return to London in his wet clothes.

Mrs. Coles at "The Cricketer's Arms" proved a kind soul. She was deeply concerned about the state of the gentleman's clothes, which indeed made little pools of water on her clean sanded floor as he stood talking to her. She thought she could cook a chop for the gentleman if he'd be content with that. Meanwhile there was her Micah's clothes—his wedding clothes as the poor boy had never worn, being drowned in the Ripple in a winter flood that carried him off and his horse, and him within four days of bein' married. The gentleman needn't fear that Micah's clothes weren't well-aired. Not a week had passed but what his mother had had them out to the fire.

He changed into the dead youth's rustic garments, leaving his own clothes a sodden mass on the floor.

"They'll take the night to get well dried, sir," Mrs. Coles said, shaking her head over them. "Leastways, if I was to hurry them up they'd be spoilt. You couldn't do with a bed here, sir?"

He glanced round the bedroom. It was clean and comfortable looking.

"Lor' bless you, sir," put in Mrs. Coles, surveying the drenched clothes, "I couldn't dry them trousers for the ten o'clock, not unless they was to be half-way up your ankles."

He had a vision of himself arriving in London with trousers half-way up his ankles and smiled grimly over it. After all, there was no special hurry. He had meant to spend the night at his club, where he had left his bag. They would not expect him at Giltraps till they saw him. It was a bore that he must do without certain toilet belongings. He would have to steal up to town by an early morning train, unshaven and looking like a ruffian. Meanwhile he had to make the best of it. He did send a thought to Freddy Vernon at the Vicarage who could have lent him things. If it had been anybody but Freddy! He could not very well send a message nor go himself in Micah's clothes. He resigned himself to doing without, to returning to the natural man for one night out of his careful, fastidious life.

After all, it was very comfortable in the inn. The rain had come on again in a steady downpour. Mrs. Coles had lit a fire in the little sitting-room which he had all to himself. He would not have cared to face even an uncritical and simple world in Micah's clothes—too short at wrists and ankles, too narrow across the

chest, misshapen, baggy things which made him smile as he caught sight of himself in the spotted glass above the mantelpiece.

He found an odd volume of *Clarissa Harlowe* in the small library the house contained, which consisted mostly of volumes of a technical kind dealing with the ailments of live-stock, the licensing laws and a few cheap volumes on gardening. *Clarissa* amused him well enough till bedtime, when, having set all of the window the room contained wide to let in the wet air, he slept till the market-carts were rumbling along the road.

He caught the 9 o'clock up, hoping to escape any fellow-travellers other than the busy bees who went gathering honey in the City every morning. He hoped to avoid any of his own world till he should be shaved and his own man again.

To his intense annoyance the first person he caught sight of amid the frock-coated crowd waiting for the 9 o'clock express was Mr. Frederick Vernon. In his annoyance he turned his back and walked to the other end of the platform.

At Victoria he saw again the well-known figure, too broad for its owner's years and threatening greater width, going along in the crowd in front of him. He took the first

hansom he saw and felt glad to escape Freddy.

Time was when he would have found plenty to occupy him for the day in town. Now, after he had washed and shaved and made him decent once more, he was impatient for the train that should take him back to Giltraps. There were a couple of hours to wait for a good train. He turned over the newspapers in the club room without taking in very much of what he was reading. Men came in and chaffed him for being a hermit. He had always been popular, with men as well as with women. One or two men made hospitable suggestions to him. Sir Henry Wade, an old friend whom Bretherton had not seen for some months, was for carrying him home to lunch.

"My wife was talking of you only yesterday," he said. "If you don't make some sign she'll cut you off her visiting list. What's this about your coming in for your cousin Edward's money after all? We heard something about it after we got back from Switzerland."

"It is quite true. My cousin behaved very handsomely to me."

"Ah, he owed it to you. And what of the undesirable wife? There was a very undesirable wife, wasn't there? Did she get the proverbial shilling?"

Bretherton answered in a freezing voice that there was no undesirable wife, never had been, that his cousin's choice had done him all honour, that Mrs. Harding had Littlecombe for her life, and that it was due to her disinterestedness that the property had practically reverted to him.

Sir Henry Wade, who was a distinguished diplomatist, looked foolish. He reddened over his pleasant, frosty old face, and said something about being sorry, about having made a mistake.

A few minutes later Bretherton came and sat down beside him in the screened corner where they were practically to themselves, although the room was full.

"I was rather short with you a few minutes ago, Sir Henry," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was punishing you for my own misdeeds. I might have found out five years earlier than I did that my cousin had married a charming woman. I can't forgive myself for the long injustice—to her and to my cousin. I never had the chance of making my *amende* to him. She has heaped coals of fire on my head and is unconscious of it. Some day I hope you and Lady Wade may know Mrs. Harding. Meanwhile, please forgive me."

"My dear fellow—I am ashamed of myself

for not having known better, with my profession too. Needless to say I am delighted. So will Lady Wade be; and your old friend Mab. Won't you change your mind and come home with me?"

By way of making amends for his loss of temper Bretherton went home with his old friend to Berkeley Street, where Lady Wade received him as though he were the Prodigal Son and Mab smiled shyly at him from the most alluring of brown eyes. Dear little Mab! He remembered her as a child in a white frock, with curls to match the colour of her eyes and a string of corals about her neck. They had always been great friends. He smiled at a reminiscence he had of Lady Wade and himself sitting in a scented boudoir not so many days before that day on which he had received the letter advising him of his cousin's death. Mab was to be presented this spring.

"She grows out of all knowledge," he had said.

"She is a dear girl and a good girl, and I think a pretty girl," the mother mused, looking at him out of the shadows of the fan with which she screened her yet charming complexion from the red glow of the fire.

"Lovely," he had answered, in all unconsciousness. "She grows so tall, like a little

young tree. 'Oh, English girl, divine, demure!' —that is Mab."

"We must find a good match for her, Ralph," Lady Wade had said softly. "Her father can do so little. The boys are very extravagant. Of course he must be nice and good as well as rich. And young, if we can manage it."

Ralph had understood. It was not the first time he had been warned off; and he had taken it good-humouredly as a rule. But then he had felt somewhat irritated as at a stupidity. His old friend might have trusted him.

Now—what a difference! Mab was encouraged to sing for Ralph after lunch, to show him her little portfolio of water-colour sketches done in Switzerland, quite good enough for such a pretty girl as Mab, but not good enough to stand by themselves. It was another stupidity of Lady Wade's. Sir Henry, without the least bit in the world understanding the situation, was puzzled. He wanted to talk to Ralph, whom he had always liked, whom he had not seen for a long time—man-talk. But his wife seemed bent on keeping the fellow by her skirts and Mab's all the afternoon between lunch and tea. After a while he got tired of his womankind's absorption in another man, remembered an afternoon engagement and went out.

Mab had to remind her mother with regret that there was something to be done between tea and dinner, which set Ralph free. He was glad little Mab had remembered that and that she had been honestly sorry. To the child he was just the same as when he had been a detrimental, no more and no less. Just how much that was depended on himself. He had the attraction for Mab which he had for most women, old and young, when he was willing to attract. He had not been willing in the old days, because he could not afford to let Mab fall in love with him, and because he was bound to take no advantage of the intimacy Lady Wade permitted between him and Mab. If she only had refrained from warning him off! It was one of the spoilt things of the world that do not bear thinking upon.

He escaped at about a quarter to five—really escaped. What a word to use of his leaving the kind and hospitable house in which he had always been made so welcome! He was ashamed of himself for the feeling of exhilaration with which he walked along the street, looking out for a hansom which should carry him to Paddington. After all, London was an intolerable place in these spring days, with the west wind bringing promises of one knew not what wonderful happening. How glad he was

that he was going to Giltraps and not to Lincoln's Inn! Dear Mab! He was glad she was so fresh and fair and unconscious. A dear child! He hoped she would find a young lover worthy of her and that Lady Wade would not spoil things. But as for him, his desire was not for a child like Mab. He wanted a woman, not a delicate thing in the bud such as little Mab.

Lady Wade was inexplicably irritable with her daughter, to Mab's bewilderment. The cause of it the usually equable Lady Wade poured into her husband's ears while he was dressing for dinner, talking to him through the open door between her bedroom and his dressing-room.

"Mab was so annoying, Harry. She remembered most inopportunely, just when Ralph had settled down, that we had promised to look in at the Savilles' musical party some time in the afternoon. I was so vexed with her."

"Why were you vexed with poor Mab?" the ex-diplomat asked cheerfully from the obscurity of the dressing-room. "That was all right, wasn't it? You'd had Bretherton sitting in your pocket for quite a sufficiently long time, I should say."

"You seem to forget, Henry," Lady Wade

remarked with some acidity—she always called her husband "Henry" when she disapproved of him—"you seem to forget that Mab always had a fancy for Ralph Bretherton."

"Which you threw cold water on, my dear," came in a chuckle from the dressing-room.

"For a very excellent reason," Lady Wade said, struggling with the clasp of her necklace. "But the Ralph Bretherton of to-day is not the Ralph Bretherton of three months ago."

"Three months older, my dear, and, more than that, worse in the temper. You should have heard how he picked me up when I said something about his cousin's widow—only what any one might be expected to say, knowing the story of the marriage."

"*Ah!*"

Lady Wade, having at last secured her necklace, came to the door of her husband's dressing-room.

"What was it about the cousin's widow?" she asked.

"Oh, just—I made a somewhat slighting reference to her and he turned as nasty as possible. You know what he thought of her! Well, now she is everything that she ought to be and even more."

"Just like a man!" Lady Wade remarked, with great bitterness. "Who would have

thought Ralph could be such a fool? His friends ought to do something. There certainly ought to be the *conseil de famille*, that excellent institution, here as in France."

"Oh, you think Ralph's gone on the widow? Still a *conseil de famille!* I don't know who'd have the right to interfere with Bretherton."

About ten days later Lady Wade met her husband with news bursting from her lips. It had to be kept back for some time, as an inopportune visitor happened to be present when her ladyship came in. Her husband ignored the signs she made to him when he delayed the visitor's going, with a certain malicious enjoyment. He was no gossip himself; and he had often found his wife's stories something of a mare's nest.

At last the visitor departed. Lady Wade came and stood by her husband on the hearth-rug in front of the fire.

"Harry," she said, "I've had a shock—about Ralph Bretherton."

"What! married the widow? That's rather quick work, isn't it?"

"It isn't the widow. That discovery of yours was nothing at all. You know my opinion of your perspicacity. How you ever came out as creditably as you did from your

diplomatic career, I don't know. It is something much worse than marrying the widow."

She lowered her voice as she imparted the thing she had heard.

Sir Henry listened quietly to the end.

"I don't believe it," he said at last. "Bretherton isn't that sort of chap at all."

CHAPTER XVI

Freddy Vernon met a man in the street on his return to London and mentioned to him casually that he had seen Bretherton down at Woodhay. He had a humorous story, in his estimation, to tell of their meeting, or meetings: how Bretherton, that pink of good behaviour, was in the habit of paying visits to a Sleeping Beauty in those parts to whom he was supposed to be guardian. Freddy expressed the wish, with a jovial seriousness, that the Beauty was his ward. Bretherton hadn't been at all as glad to see him as Freddy would have expected when they met by accident at the railway station. Old Daubeny, the Vicar—a saintly Babe in the Wood—had consulted Freddy anxiously about what manner of man Bretherton was. He had accidentally in a thunderstorm come upon Bretherton consoling the Beauty in the kindest possible way. Bretherton had rejected the Vicar's offer of a change of his wet garments, a meal and possibly a bed at the Vicarage. Said he must get back to town

by the 6.15. Next morning, Freddy being hauled out of bed at an impossible hour by the vagaries of a client and being obliged to catch the nine o'clock express, encountered Bretherton going up by the same train; and Bretherton seemed uncommonly anxious to avoid him. In the circumstances Freddy had thought it better not to see.

To Freddy Vernon it was only a merry tale. It never occurred to him—he would have stared at you if you had suggested such a thing—that he was doing murder on the character of an innocent girl and a man who was presumably a gentleman and a decent liver. His code of morals was an easy one. He had rather a neat way of turning an epigram, and one of his epigrams had been that you always believed a man or a woman guilty till you proved them innocent.

He went on his way cheerfully after telling the tale; and the clubman he had told it to repeated it to the next clubman; and so it spread.

Presently it travelled down to Woodhay, mysteriously as such things have a way of doing, and reached the Vicar, who had not the remotest idea that the story had started from his own house, and that part, at least, of its genesis was with himself. He

heard of it from Jim Douglas, who had picked it up from the landlord of a neighbouring hostelry. Jim Douglas, although a rampant Tory in politics, had a natural love for his fellow-man that made him on friendly terms with every man, woman, and child in the village. The Vicar, being an unworldly, unconventional-minded man, saw no harm in Jim's drinking a pot of ale if he liked it now and again at the "Blue Boar." He thought he knew the lad too well to fear any evil consequences; and John Hailsham, the landlord of the "Blue Boar," was an honest fellow, a good Churchman, an excellent father of a family, and a host who conducted his inn on sound and honest principles.

Jim was reading Latin with the Vicar. They sat either side of the table in the Vicar's study, the windows of which were so curtained with creepers that they admitted a very tempered light, even out of the time of leaves; the furniture, to say nothing of the floor—the Vicar sat all but knee-deep in papers which he was going to examine some day—was heaped with books and magazines and old newspapers and all manner of things. The lad looked up in the midst of a passage from Herodotus, and his good freckled face suddenly turned red to its thick thatch of fair hair.

"Do you know what they're saying in the village?" he asked, with a quiet violence. "Hailsham told me. Hailsham said it was a beastly shame. They're saying . . . things against that poor girl at Honeywells—about the man who comes to see her. There's a story . . . I don't want to repeat it, sir. What brutes people are! I told Hailsham it was all a beastly lie, and he agreed with me. I'd like to know who started it; Vernon was rather objectionable; but, of course, it couldn't have been Vernon."

"I should think not Vernon," said the Vicar in a great hurry. "My dear lad, you don't suppose Vernon would do such a thing? I know he has his light way of talking, but he means nothing. Besides, how on earth could anything Vernon said come to Woodhay?"

"I don't know," the boy returned gloomily. "All I know is that I should like to punch his fat head. It's not slang, sir. He really has a fat head. Anyhow, he began it."

The Vicar consulted Mrs. Daubeny about the matter of the stories, and she, being a sensible woman and a good Christian, decided that it was her "duty to countenance Avis Bourne, so that the ignorant people among whom the gossip seemed to circulate might see that their betters did not believe it."

"Or merely conclude that you are less particular than they, my dear," the Vicar said, with a half-amused ruefulness.

Mrs. Daubeny's good intentions were somewhat interfered with by Avis's unwillingness to respond. She was not ungracious; it was not in her to be ungracious; but plainly she did not want to be drawn out of her retirement. Mrs. Daubeny had asked the girl to tea. Her own girl, Margery, who was studying music abroad, was home for a brief holiday. Wouldn't Miss Bourne like to meet a girl of her own age and tastes? Mrs. Daubeny had not been minded to go so far when she set out to pay that visit to Honeywells. To stand by a girl whom one believes slandered, out of common kindness and Christian charity, was one thing; to thrust the same girl into friendship with one's adored only daughter was another. But, as Mrs. Daubeny confided to her husband on her return from the call, the girl impressed her so obviously as a singularly innocent creature that it had driven her into violent partizanship.

"I offered her Margery for a friend," she said; "or perhaps it would be better to say that I gave her the chance of being friends with Margery. She refused, very gently but very distinctly. This Barbara is quite satisfied

with her tower. The refusal would have been final if her maid had not happened to be in the room at the moment. 'Oh, Miss Avis,' she said, as though the girl were a child, 'it's not at all nice of you to refuse Mrs. Daubeny's kind invitation. And Miss Margery at home, too! Why, it is not so long ago since I heard you wishing you had a sister. I really think you must say "Yes" to Mrs. Daubeny. It will be a great pleasure for you.' Then the girl, colouring up to the roots of her hair, said she would come. I'm not sure I wanted the woman's intervention. But there it was. And Avis comes on Tuesday."

On the Tuesday Avis came, and after Margery Daubeny had won her out of her first shyness the two became quite friendly. They walked in the Vicarage garden together, and went to see the Shetland, Beauty, who would either go like the wind or not at all. Afterwards they climbed to the top of the house, where Margery's one-time nursery had been turned into her own particular private den. She could practise there without disturbing any one. There was her violin in its case, There stood her piano with heaps of music upon it. The room was whitewashed and had beams in the ceiling. There was a bright little red fire in the grate; and in the clear

March light the room showed itself full of Margery's pictures and books and china, Morris cretonne at the windows and door, Burne-Jones and Rossetti photographs and autotypes on the background of white wall.

Margery played on her violin; and then would have Avis sing to her; and she talked to Avis of the delights of a musical career and the life abroad; and was a little disappointed because Avis could not be roused to enthusiasm, but seemed to shrink from anything that would take her beyond the gates of Honeywells.

The sound of the tea-bell brought them downstairs, where Mr. and Mrs. Daubeny awaited them in the drawing-room; and presently Jim Douglas came in, looking curiously shy for him, and handed the bread and butter and carried the tea, finally sitting down in a deep chair where his shoulders were hunched up to his ears, red with the March wind or something else, and the shadow was about him and he could sit and stare at Avis unnoticed.

Immediately tea was over Avis would go home; and she went in charge of Margery and Jim Douglas. That was Mrs. Daubeny's idea that the girl the villagers were slandering should be seen in company with the daughter

of the Vicarage who had grown up in the place, whom the villagers were at home with and devoted to.

The three did indeed set out to walk together; but just outside the Vicarage gates somebody came up on a bicycle who turned out to be Arthur Chatterton, a former curate of Mr. Daubeny's and a very particular friend of the Vicar's daughter. So she turned back with him and left Avis to go on her way with Jim Douglas alone.

But though these staunch friends might stand by Avis the scandal had no abatement; and the next thing the Vicar had was a note from Mrs. Prideaux, one of his best supporters in the parish, informing him of what she had heard about Miss Bourne, and suggesting that companionship between her and Margery Daubeny would be a most undesirable thing.

Now Mr. Daubeny was not the person to be turned from doing what he thought just and right; but an interview with Mrs. Prideaux, in which the lady positively declined to come round to his point of view, perturbed him considerably. What on earth was to be done? Everywhere he went now the story of the scandal was buzzed about. It was inconceivable how it gathered and took unto itself like a rolling snowball. At this moment

Margery's holiday came to an end and she had to return to her work. Not for worlds would the parents have acknowledged to each other that it was a relief; but a relief it really was. It had not been agreeable to them, though they had done it for right's sake, to see their darling only daughter coming and going with Avis Bourne, the girl whose fair name was being torn to rags and tatters by the country-side. Margery being gone there was not the same reason for Avis's coming to the Vicarage. In fact, at the moment the Vicar began to be anxious in quite another direction and to question the wisdom of a very close association between Honeywells and Woodhay Vicarage.

Jim Douglas had begun to change inexplicably. From being an open and cheerful youth he had come to be dark and almost sullen, his good freckled face wearing a dogged look as though he would do battle with his world. He wasn't working well either, and the Vicar, knowing that his mother had made many sacrifices to educate her boys and give them honourable professions, was worried as to Jim's chances of passing into Sandhurst.

There came a day when Jim, looking up from his books with an expression which told the Vicar he had not been thinking of them, said suddenly—

"I've scotched one damnable lie, sir. The man slept at the 'Cricketers' Arms' that night. I found it out in the simplest way in the world. I went in for a glass of beer, and the landlady, who is a good soul, drew my attention to a volume of an old novel which she was reading. 'It's a very pretty story,' she said, 'but it don't seem to have beginning or ending. Yet a gentleman as slept here a few weeks ago he seemed to like it. He came in fair drenched with the rain; 'twere the night of the bad thunderstorm and he'd been out in it. He sat up late reading it; and he left an envelope in it to mark his place when he went to bed.' 'Who was the gentleman,' I asked her, feeling that I knew all the time. 'I don't know, sir,' she said. 'But he was a real gentleman and was most agreeable about the accommodation. I suppose it was his own name on the envelope.' With that she pushed the book across to me. It was a volume of an old novel, *Clarissa Harlowe*, and the envelope had on it Bretherton's name and address. Here it is, sir."

The Vicar glanced at the envelope. He did not know that he altogether approved of the boy's interest in the business—from a fastidious feeling of delicacy as much as anything else. He would rather have steered his pupil clear of such things.

"Ah, well, my lad," he said. "We didn't believe this, you and I. As for the others, who believe such things, perhaps the Archangel Gabriel would not turn them from believing."

A day or two later he saw his way out. He was given to acting on impulse when his wife was not by to guide and direct him.

Coming back from visiting a sick parishioner he saw bearing down on him a tall figure of a man in clerical dress—Father Darley on his way to visit Avis. The Vicar had heard of Father Darley although they had not met. He greeted him courteously, introducing himself. He had not a tinge of narrowness or bigotry and he would have been very glad to entertain Father Darley at the Vicarage. Hearing that he was on his way to Honeywells he turned and walked with him, talking of casual things.

They were almost at the gate of Honeywells when the solution broke upon him. Of course this man, the girl's spiritual father and close friend, was the one who of all others ought to know.

Stopping him by the break in the hedge of laurels, through which they had a lovely view of the valley full of sheep and lambs and the opposite heights, he laid an impressive apologetic hand upon Father Darley's arm and told him the tale. Neither had eyes for the

exquisite landscape in all the March purity of outline and splendour of light, no ears for the clamorous singing of birds which was all about them.

The priest had looked very stern while the story was told. As it came to a conclusion his eyes, frostily-grey as they gazed unseeing across the valley, had a blurred look of suffering in them.

"Poor child!" he said, "poor child! It is the whitest who are the most easily smirched, the most difficult to make white again. I ought to have foreseen it; I ought to have warned Bretherton. But—I believed I saw the end of it all, that he and Avis would marry, so I did not meddle. We ought to have had a little more prudence for the child's sake, he and I, to save her from this wickedness."

"What are you going to do?"

The priest considered.

"Bretherton ought to know," he said after a pause.

The Vicar's face cleared.

"If your idea was the correct one—that it would end in marriage, why the whole thing would be cleared up by their marriage. The people have said shameful things. You know what they are. God help them! Their lives don't have much room for sentiment. I'm so

glad we happened to meet. Will you have time to look me up on your way to the railway station?"

"Hardly. But when I come again. I shall keep you in kind memory."

They parted at the gate of Honeywells. Father Darley standing by the gate looked after the Vicar with a little gleam of amusement in his eyes. There was not much of the professional in the aspect of Mr. Daubeny, who had recently taken to golfing and was now wearing a homespun suit of a most unclerical cut.

"A good soul!" he said to himself. "A good soul!"

CHAPTER XVII

The March sunshine was growing every day more clear and splendid. There was a sprinkling of emerald green on the hedges. The blackthorn-blossom was out, with as yet no faintest hint of the blackthorn winter. March was doing her spring-cleaning, bringing up the grass and the flowers to cover the litter of dead leaves and withered stalks and branches left from last year. Daffodils danced on the lawn of Littlecombe Hall. The gardens were full of the clean spring flowers—crocus and anemone, narcissus and primula—and the pear and cherry had begun to bud.

London might well have forgotten Ralph Bretherton, for he seemed to have forgotten it. In those bright March days when he hunted three days a week and lost the London pallor, replacing it by a healthy ruddiness which became him, he sometimes had a glimpse of himself as he used to be and wondered. How had he been content with that life of a *flâneur?* He was bitterly contemptuous of himself as he

had been, doing nothing that counted in the sum of human activity or human happiness. A mere haunter of clubs and drawing-rooms, desiring nothing greatly, hating nothing greatly. How had he resigned himself to it? he asked in the fulness of the new life which had come to him, in which he seemed to be pulsing with energy, fresh for every day, looking forward with passionate eagerness to that wonderful new thing to come which was in the air of March, in the songs of the blackbirds and thrushes.

He had dropped easily into the life of the country-gentleman, doing the things which Edward Harding by his ill-health had been debarred from doing. He had just been appointed a magistrate: he was on half-a-dozen boards and committees. He had begun farming the eighty acres that belonged to Giltraps. When he walked out of mornings to see his sheep and lambs, to watch his corn and his turnips coming up in the furrows, he marvelled at that man of not much more than three months ago who took his exercise in the Park or in Bond Street, whose orbit was the London life, who seemed content to grow into an elderly butterfly flitting from drawing-room to drawing-room, from the dinner-table to the theatre, from Hurlingham to Ascot, and so on through the dreary, painted round of the year.

For serious occupation besides his own farming there was Littlecombe and its affairs. Littlecombe had several thousand acres to its rent-roll. Many villages, farms and homesteads were on the estate. Things had been let go a good deal during Edward Harding's life of suffering. There were arrears of work for the man who succeeded him.

In doing what he had to do Bretherton made many friends, since he set out with a conscientious desire and intention of doing his best for these people who were in his hands: some enemies also, for wastrels had to be warned and if warnings did not suffice to be got rid of. Certain rights long allowed to lapse had to be claimed and upheld. Everything about Littlecombe was poached—the fish in the river, the game in the woods. Fencing had to be done, walls rebuilt. It had to be made apparent to the men who poached a pheasant or a hare whenever they pleased that there was such a thing as private property. Servants had to be reprimanded or changed if they did not mend their ways. It was abundantly evident that Edward Harding and Littlecombe had been systematically robbed. Bretherton more than suspected that the gamekeepers were in league with the poachers—were in fact poachers themselves.

He sent for Harry Sprague and interviewed him in the little room at Giltraps of which he made an office. The man came in with a swaggering and insolent air, but Bretherton could not help being struck by his remarkable good looks. There was a touch of the gipsy in his dark eyes with the yellow in the whites of them, in the black hair, the splendid colour as of the sun, the grace with which the loose, long-limbed fellow bore himself. Bretherton, sitting at his writing-table, looked up to meet the insolent gipsy eyes. It irked him to know that the fellow was Mrs. Harding's cousin; still more to remember that their names had been coupled together; there was a likeness between them which annoyed Bretherton exceedingly. The steady gaze with which he met the other's eyes had something of enmity in them; something too of the quelling power of the man of birth and education over the ignorant man. Before that steady gaze Sprague's eyes at last lowered their insolence.

"I sent for you, Sprague, to say that for the future things are to be conducted on the estate in a very different manner from the way they have been conducted of late," Bretherton said. "There have been no pheasants to speak of this winter—at least they have gone somewhere else than to the owners of the estate. The

whole place is to be thoroughly wired and fenced; I propose to lay down a considerable number of pheasants this autumn. I shall look for good results."

"The place wasn't attended to in Mr. Harding's lifetime," Sprague said sullenly. "It stands to reason that if you don't lay down pheasants there won't be no pheasants."

"You are wrong there, Sprague; the pheasants were laid down."

"The chicks died in the cold summers we've been having. You can't rear pheasants in a summer like last year."

Bretherton waved away the excuses with a gesture haughtier than he was aware of.

"We won't discuss the question further, if you please," he said. "Only I shall expect pheasants next season. You understand."

"The place is full of poachers," Sprague muttered, with a red light in his eyes.

"It is your business to protect the game from poachers," Bretherton said, ringing the bell and telling Dixon when he came into the room that he was ready to see Mr. Eales if he had come.

Sprague went out with a lowering brow, muttering things under his breath. Some curious, primitive impulse in Bretherton had made him want to take the fellow by the

throat ; but he controlled himself. He said to himself that if Sprague must be dismissed Mrs. Harding's consent should first be obtained. By her influence, if not by her appointment, the man was where he was ; only with her consent should he go. Yet he had a curious resentment of his presence in the place. The old father and mother had their dignity. They did no wrong to their daughter by being there. It was different with Sprague with whom rumour, rightly or wrongly, had associated her name. He wished Sprague was cleared out of the place, beyond seas somewhere, too far to come back and call cousins with Mrs. Harding of Littlecombe Hall. Another man feeling as he did might have suggested his going, giving him the ways and means. Bretherton was too proud to do anything of the kind.

He spoke to Lizzie—she was Lizzie in his mind now and he thought no other name could suit her as well, although the time had been when he had regarded the name with dislike, holding it a servant's name—of the interview with Sprague, or something of it.

" I'm sorry," he said, " because he is kin of yours. But—I'm afraid he hasn't been minding his business."

It was a mild way of saying that the

gamekeeper had been minding his own interests, not his employer's; and as he said it he sent a questioning look towards her.

She met the look with a frank gaze that held it. The faint colour mounted to her clear, dark cheeks; but her eyes did not drop.

"Poor Harry!" she said, "he was always somewhat wild. He's been steadier of late years. He promised Edward he'd give up the drink when he came on the estate: and I hope he's kept his promise. His mother, who was father's only sister, was terribly fond of Harry."

Impossible to say whether her mercy was due to more than the fact of the relationship between herself and the gamekeeper, seeing that his conduct was in question.

Her next words answered the thought. Her colour increased steadily but her eyes kept their direct gaze.

"I feel I did him a wrong," she said; "because, poor fellow, he had a fancy for me; and I never, never could return it. I never could even like him. It's the way with a woman, Cousin Ralph, to dislike the one who wants her when she can't feel the same to him. I'd always have run into a mouse-hole from poor Harry. That's why I was the more bound to help him if I could, seeing he was Aunt Jane's only son."

He had a sensation as though his very soul breathed relief. Impossible to doubt that face, those eyes. He wiped away something that had fretted and chafed him from his mind for ever. And yet,—he wished Edward Harding had got rid of the fellow instead of planting him at his very doors.

"We are going to preserve the game on the estate," he said. "I fancy Leadenhall Market has had a good deal of it hitherto. I want you to co-operate with me on your part of the property. I don't know that I want to sell the game as so many people do. I'd rather the sick and poor here had it than the sick and poor in London even. We shall deal generously with them. But if there is to be any game it must be preserved. I'm not a fanatical believer in the Game Laws; but we must think of those who come after us. We can't choose for them."

"No," she said; "we can't choose for them."

He had a sudden thrill at the conjunction of himself with her in the words. She was certainly very feminine. He supposed poor Edward had felt that, that delicate flavour and scent of femininity without which so many a pretty woman is a scentless flower, holding no attraction for the bees.

Again, it was a question of the Common that

stretched in front of Littlecombe Hall. The family had had manorial rights over it from time immemorial. During the latter years of Edward Harding's life people had begun to encroach. The Common, a lovely stretch of gorse and ling and woodland, was in danger of losing its chiefest beauty. From picnic parties driving over from Birmingham in char-à-bancs, it was an easy transition to circuses and merry-go-rounds. The cottagers at the edge of the Common had begun to throw their refuse on to the Common itself. Their cattle and horses and donkeys were let loose to stray where they would. Neighbouring football and cricket clubs had made the Common their own without asking for permission. Soon it would have lost all its green seclusion; its wild, yet ordered beauty.

Edward Harding might be easy-going about other things, not so about the Common. During those last sad months his wife, to save him trouble and disturbance of mind, had let things go to some considerable extent. Once, indeed, she had interfered with some trippers from Birmingham who were lighting their fires, a forbidden thing, amid the gorse, and had been treated with insult. The neighbouring cottagers, too, resented any interference with what had come to be their privileges. They

showed, by insolence of manner, what they thought of Mrs. Harding's claims to act as the Squire's wife. There was a deal of discontent seething in the hearts of the cottagers, not at all alleviated by the fact that Littlecombe Hall kept them alive during the hard winters. This was especially the case with Littlecombe village, a place with a queer population, lawless and intractable, of gipsy origin, according to the local historians.

Bretherton had been away for a day or two. When he came back he learned to his intense indignation from Mrs. Harding that she had been rudely treated by some members of the local cricket-club, who had selected a new pitch on the Common and were mowing and rolling it preparatory to the opening of the cricket season.

"I found it hard to do," she said, looking at him with her candid and brave eyes. "Naturally they resent it in me. Only I remembered what you said—we are the trustees of those who come after us. Besides, I am the people's trustee. If I let things go as they wish Littlecombe Common would be lost to them and their children as well as to us."

"What did they do?" he asked, suddenly white. It was not often that he fell in a violent passion; but he had the capacity for it

though he did not waste himself on slight occasions. Now, quiet as his manner was, he saw red.

"What matter?"

Woman-like she was at once pleased and terrified.

"What did they do?" he repeated.

He forced it from her unwillingly. Apparently they had said nothing, but with sullen insolence had driven the heavy roller full tilt against her so that she had to retreat or be crushed in its path.

He dragged the men's names from her. He knew them, a pair of black-browed ruffians who were engaged as hedgers and ditchers, who worked when they would and left off when they would; who drank, poached and were more than suspected of being light-fingered when the occasion offered. He strode away from her straight to the ramshackle cottages in which Nat Goodchild and his brother James, with their wide-hipped, black-haired, handsome viragoes of wives, and their healthy flock of ragged, picturesque youngsters, lived. The cottages were coming down. Bretherton was of a mind with Mrs. Harding that the day was over when human beings might be housed worse than oxen. The Goodchilds resented the demolition of their cottages as

much as anything else, even though they were to be transplanted to decent habitations. If he had had time to think of it he would perhaps not have gone. After all one man, however brave, however angry, could have little chance against a pair of brawny ruffians like the Goodchilds, to say nothing of their wives who would have been a match for most men. But he was too angry to think of being prudent.

When he stepped under the low lintel of Nat Goodchild's cottage, although the April evening was clear and beautiful outside, he could hardly see for the smoke and the dimness within. Some half-naked children, with a couple of lurchers who growled unfriendly as he made his appearance, were sitting on the earthen floor. A bullfinch, which had had its eyes put out to make it sing the more—it was one of the things he abhorred in the Goodchilds that they conducted a horrible traffic in song-birds—was singing so lustily as to deafen him. A flame sprang up from the green twigs, the smoke of which made his eyes sting, and fell on the scowling face of Nat Goodchild sitting on a low stool by the hearth. Mrs. Goodchild was just carrying away a black pot from the fire which, judging by the smell, contained something very savoury. In the

background an old Mrs. Goodchild sat like a sibyl in the shadows. The effect of the whole thing was Rembrandtesque.

Bretherton said a few words, icy and cutting. The immense force of his anger behind the words made him ominously quiet.

What he said was well calculated to make the Goodchilds spring at his throat. But to his amazement, somewhat to his discomfiture, Nat Goodchild, after the first threatening movement, did nothing. The old woman behind him had come forward into the light. There was something splendid about her as the flame of the wood leaping up flung her face into sudden prominence. She looked quite incredibly old. Her face was like an ivory mask, traced all over with a network of lines and wrinkles. But her eyes in their hollow caverns were still bright. Shrunken as she was from a height which must once have been great, there was an air of majesty about her that suggested an old, old queen of her tribe. She put her hand on the great hulking fellow's arm and he subsided into his former position by the hearth.

"Nat and Jim have been bad boys, sir, bad boys," she said, and the old cracked voice had a tinkling note of music. "It's a long time ago since the Goodchilds and the Hardings made a pact, sir, that the Goodchilds weren't to vex the

Hardings and that the Hardings would let them be. My sons have broken it, sir. And Mrs. Harding has been good to me and mine. Tell the gentlemen you're sorry, Nat."

"Sorry, sir," said Goodchild, glowering at him.

"Mrs. Harding and you, sir, will have no more trouble from my children," said the old woman, and it was as though a queen declared an alliance with her equal.

CHAPTER XVIII

Bretherton had been dining at Littlecombe Hall. It was early May now, and the fierce, scorching east wind had had no power to destroy the delicious odours of the gorse which was out in splendid bloom on the Common and had basked all day in a blazing sun.

It had come to be a usual thing with him to dine at Littlecombe Hall. He loved the simple domestic occasions when the old father and mother, dressed in their best, sat up stiffly in high-backed chairs, and he was the only guest. He had grown to have a great appreciation of old Nicholas Morton, who was a delightful old man of a mingled simplicity and shrewdness. There was something of the idealist, of the simple natural poet, in his character. He might have belonged to the days when England was really Merry England, when the workers built her ancient churches and beautiful houses, when they made the wonderful flower-names and gave to places the names that are like the beads of a golden rosary. There was a certain imagination all compact in Nicholas Morton, and the

traditions and folk-lore of the country were locked up in him to be revealed only to the one who had won his confidence.

His old wife said nothing, only listened and smiled approval while he talked. His daughter watched him with a grave tenderness. Occasionally she would get up and go to his side, to pick up his table-napkin or perhaps to unfold it where he had left it folded, for the old people did not so easily take to the superfluities of life. Or she would give him bread or salt or something he wanted, and pause by him a minute to arrange the flower in his coat or smooth the wisp of silvery hair on top of his head.

There was nothing offensive about the Mortons. Their age had come upon them pleasantly, and though the old man's hands were twisted with rheumatism and the old woman suffered from bronchitis in the damp weather, they made a pleasant pair to look on with their happy resignation to whatever ills they had to bear and their cheerful philosophy of life. Their daughter gave up a deal of time to them. It was her tender care that made them look as they did, as pretty as a picture, the old man with the flower in his black coat and his silver hair well brushed and smoothed, the old woman in her simple, black silk dress,

the little bit of old lace at her neck and in the cap that covered her grey hairs.

They had got over their first awe of Bretherton and were quite at ease in his presence. He liked to imagine them as they must have been in their prime and the environment in which their daughter had grown up to be what she was. He said to himself now that the old couple—for the matter of that they were not so old in years, only that the life of hard work ages quickly—explained their daughter. The girl must have been brought up in simple natural surroundings. The facts of life might have been known to her and been a part of the life amid which she grew up : but there would always have been a simple integrity, a natural piety. The changes of the seasons and the procession of the months would have formed part of her life. She was a daughter of the fields. At times something of the loneliness of the fields lay about her ; at other times when she coloured, when she laughed—he had heard her laugh of late and it had been a sweet and ringing laughter, a relief to him, for laughter so often betrays a common mind and origin—she had something of the joy, of the glow, of springing, of harvest.

The old people retired early. Their daughter would take them upstairs. Sometimes

they went from the dinner-table and he would remain smoking his cigar; he would find her, a quiet and restful figure in her soft dress of silky black which neither swished nor rustled, in the drawing-room. He always had a sense of rest, of peace, in finding her there. If he came in before she appeared he was ill at ease, dissatisfied.

To-night the old people sat a while in the drawing-room by the bright fire which was so welcome of evenings. They liked to hear their daughter play. Her accomplishment of music was a slight one. Edward Harding had had her taught; but perhaps it was too late for her to learn very much. Once she had said to Bretherton, lifting her fingers, roughened and coarsened by early hard work, for his inspection, that her sense of touch had been spoilt. He felt a curious yearning over her hands, something he had never felt over the soft white hands of the women he had been accustomed to meet.

The old couple rejoiced in the accomplishment, slight as it was. She sent Bretherton a glance of wistful apology as she sat down to play. He was something of a virtuoso in music, and set down at the piano it was not always easy to detach him. Presently, when the old folk had gone to bed, he would play for her. His music would have been a

puzzlement and a bewilderment to the old folk. They liked the Blue Bells of Scotland and Bonnie Dundee and the Last Rose of Summer. He was often uncertain how much she understood of what he played; but he would turn from the piano to see her sitting, pensive, her cheek in her hand by the fire, listening as though she understood. Once he caught a flash of tears in her eyes and was pleased. But by this time he did not need that to tell him she had a soul.

After she had played her simple tunes with school-girl runs and variations she carried the old couple off to bed. He waited for her return, standing with his back to the fire, gazing down the long double drawing-rooms to the door at the end by which she must enter. He had not yet diagnosed his case; nothing could have been further from his mind and character than to have love-making thoughts of his cousin's widow and he not six months dead,—even though, even though,—it had been borne in upon him that it had been an adoption rather than a marriage. Passion had had no place in Edward Harding's marriage.

While he watched the door by which she must enter he became aware of the singing of the nightingales. One had just tuned up, and when he called another answered him till

the tall trees out on the Common were a grove of song. He listened, his head bent. Old Bastable came in with a tray of glasses and replenished the fire. He was momentarily disappointed because it was Bastable and not she who came.

The long rooms had a quiet and austere beauty. They were not overcrowded with furniture nor the walls with pictures. A few pictures of beautiful women in oval frames; a couple of mirrors; ancient candelabra with a thousand glass drops lit up by the reflection of the wax candles; the high windows with their hangings of old chintz; the faded carpet of rose-wreaths; the decorated ceiling; the few pieces of exquisite furniture: all was in perfect taste. He smiled a little acridly, remembering how he had thought of her as Blowsabella in these beautiful rooms, a jarring note, a discordant presence. And instead her simple dignity, her natural stateliness were absolutely in keeping with them.

She came in at last apologizing for her delay. She had said prayers with her old folk before saying good-night to them. Something of the innocence of praying childhood was on her lips, in her dewy eyes.

"Come and hear the nightingales," he said, drawing her towards the window. She needed

no wrap. Her evening frocks were so modestly cut; just leaving the throat free. He liked the puritanism in her. One evening the Duchess of Frant had dined at Littlecombe—of late her Grace had been rather *empressée* to Edward Harding's widow—and had appeared in a low-cut gown which left little to the imagination. Mrs. Harding had blushed as her eyes fell on her Grace, and had kept her gaze carefully averted afterwards. Her terrible Grace had noticed it; and had remarked—in the midst of a grumble about Ascension Day falling in race week and her being late for the start because she always made it a point to attend service in her parish church—that she could see Mrs. Harding was shocked at her gown, but it was really two inches higher than Mrs. Lafontaine's.

They went out to the verandah together. The east wind still blew fiercely; the moon had a coppery haze and there was a dry chill in the air, although they were in shelter, the wind blowing the other side of the house. There was a poignant sweetness in the night despite the east wind. The spice of the gorse mixed with the heavy sweetness of the May-trees which showed their great bushes of bloom out on the Common. The verandah

was wreathed in honey-suckle. The flower-beds between the house and the gates of fine iron-work, which were among the notable things of the county, were filled with wall-flowers and pinks and such sweet-smelling things.

They stood side by side an instant. The peace of the night was perfect. Nothing stirred but the nightingales. Far away there was a bleating of lambs, one of the sounds of the May night.

"What a night!" said Bretherton, drawing a deep breath.

As he said it, beyond the pine-grove something golden sprang up. There was a mass of smoke, shot through with flame. The smoke curled up with the reflection of the light upon it. There was a crackling and rushing sound. The Common was on fire.

"Oh, the poor rabbits and squirrels and birds!" she cried at his ear. "The birds are all nesting! Oh, what wickedness!"

While they looked the flames broke out in a new place. Some one shouted in the distance. Others were aware of the fire besides themselves.

They went back into the house to give the alarm. Ten o'clock, and most of the men would be in bed. Some one must go round

and waken them up. They must do all possible to beat out the flames.

She gave her orders, composed and yet hurried. While she gave them she was selecting a cloak from those which hung in the cloak-room off the hall.

"You are not coming," Bretherton said.

"Yes, I am coming. But I must wrap up, for my dress is somewhat light and might catch."

He selected a thick blackthorn stick from the many that were in the stand. She had provided herself similarly. They ran out across the lawn, dewless in the east-wind night. Before them now there was a steady glare amid a mass of shining smoke. Even the sky was lurid overhead.

Beyond the pine copse they could see better. They saw the forms of people pass and re-pass between them and the fire. At this point the Common was a wild expanse of gorse, with here and there an old tree standing up. When they got into the paths between the gorse they met at intersecting paths groups of people hurrying towards the fire. Some were laughing and enjoying it; others evidently seriously bent on helping.

With the wind against them the flames ran their way. They saw them leap up and catch

the lower branches of a solitary tree; but they died out without going much further. He heard her tender complaints of pity for the little furry creatures whose homes were in the gorse and bracken as they ran. He caught her hand and held it to keep her from stumbling. It was a hard hand, but it sent quick currents of blood rushing through his veins. A singed rabbit ran under their feet towards shelter. The heat came in waves against their faces. There were trails of sparks in the undergrowth between them and the fire. It was travelling towards them.

"Not that way," he said, running with her. "We must get to windward of the flames."

They had to double back into dark paths and make a round to get to a place of safety. Lurking figures skulked between the gorse and bracken; or perhaps they were only shadows. The nightingales were still singing their hearts out in the pine copse which was beyond the reach of the flames. The hoarse shouting of men mingled now with the noise of the fire. Groups of people bore down upon them. And now they were in the main avenue leading to the place where the fire had broken out, and they could see and hear that a number

of people were already trying to beat out the flames.

Presently they had scores of helpers. There were a dozen men in evening dress, men who had been dining when the fire broke out and were ready to take command or to work. It was not so easy to direct the willing helpers.

And now the flames broke out in another part of the Common, and there was a rush in that direction. Fortunately the paths were fairly wide. They gave the chance of limiting the fire to a certain area. Lord Esmé Carew, the Duchess of Frant's younger son, who was home from his engineering college, gave invaluable help. People were posted all down the paths at either side of the burning gorse and bracken to keep the fire from leaping across the path to the vegetation beyond.

The east wind, after all, was friendly. It drove the flames one way, and that towards the edge of the Common. Bye and bye, even if it were left the fire would burn itself out.

Prominent among the willing helpers were the two Goodchilds and Sprague, the gamekeeper. The latter had arrived rather late on the scene, but, being come, proved a most valuable assistant. It was he who picketed men to watch the Common, where small

isolated fires were bursting out now and again, fortunately not taking much hold, for the trees and bushes were full of the spring sap and resisted the flames which ate up the undergrowth like tinder.

By midnight the last of the fire was out. Everybody was as black as coal and tired out, but very cheerful. The exhilaration of subduing the fire was yet with them.

To-morrow would be time enough to thank those who had given such willing help. Bretherton walked with Mrs. Harding across the Common to the hall-door of Littlecombe. His dog-cart was waiting for him at the gate. He stood while she turned the handle of the door and opened it, letting out a flood of light. She said "Good night" to him, her face in the shadow. What was the matter with him? He had a sudden passionate sense of what it would mean if they were going home together to the shelter of one roof. He crushed out the thought as soon as it was formed.

"I shan't ask you in," she said, with the slightest touch of demure coquetry. "I am not fit to be seen. I don't believe I've any eyebrows or lashes. The flames burst in my face when I was trying to beat them down."

He was delighted with the something new in her.

"I refuse to believe in such injuries," he said, holding her hand while he looked at her. "But, if they were there, you need not be afraid of my eyes."

She withdrew her hand gently from his. Had he frightened her?

"Good night," she said, hurrying over the threshold, stumbling a little with fatigue, or because the skirts of her long gown were trailing.

"Good night," he called after her, and hurried away down the pathway of light which shone out on the sleek sides of his mare and the silver plating of her harness.

At home at Giltraps a letter awaited him. He opened it. It was from Father Darley.

"My dear Bretherton,

"If you happen to be in town will you call at Forest Street any day before three o'clock. I have something of considerable importance to talk to you about.

"I remain,

"Yours very truly in Xt.,

"Louis Darley."

What was there in the simple letter to send

his mood of exhilaration toppling down? He hardly knew. That meant going up to town. He did not want to go up to town. The thought of the old life was a wearisome to him. How had he ever spent his May in town? It must be something about Avis, of course. "Of considerable importance." What could it be? unless a lover had suddenly appeared on the scene. Or Avis might have determined to take up her musical career.

He went to bed with a sense of weariness and annoyance because he must go to town to-morrow. The sooner the better, since he would get it over and be free to come back.

CHAPTER XIX

He had seen Father Darley and had heard his tale. The priest had delayed to tell him of the scandal which had arisen till he had thoroughly sifted the matter. Now the interview was a short one. It had taken place in a bare, ascetic room which had an unlived-in air, plainly a waiting-room. Bretherton would remember as long as he lived the Crucifix on the chimney-piece, the praying Saint, the Madonna with the seven swords through her heart, on the wall.

He was overwhelmed. At first he could say nothing.

"But—how? . . ." he asked, fumbling for words.

"Son," said the priest, with a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "There is no need to ask how. The world is quick to believe evil. I think the story originated with some friend of yours. As a matter of fact it has reached me in another form as affecting you, not her; I mean from people to whom she is hardly a

personality, or a name. It is an insult and a wrong to you, I know. But it is of the child I think most. I blame myself. I saw the imprudence of your visits—but . . . but . . . you will forgive me, I am sure—I thought it would end in marriage. It seemed to me that if you did not contemplate a marriage now you must later. The child's innocence and sweetness must win your heart. I said to myself that you could not be thrown together without a natural affection springing up in your hearts. We priests are forbidden the ties other men may form; but we are not made of stone not to be able to see and feel the gracious charm of a creature like Avis. My son—would it be so hard to stamp out the lie by making her your wife?"

There had been a momentary silence in the room which had witnessed, no doubt, many things stranger than this.

"There is no one else?" the priest asked, with a sound of alarm in his voice.

Bretherton looked up at him and the blood had come into his eyes.

"There is no one else," he said. He continued to look steadily at the face which had become very pitiful. "If there were," he went on, "having unwittingly done this wrong the only thing left for me would be to shelter that

innocent creature from suffering by it so far as I could. Poor little Avis! But what if Avis says no to me?"

"She will not," the priest said in a hurry. "She will not. That faithful servant of hers—the woman does not like me, for the usual reason, I suppose—but there can be no doubt about her being devoted to Avis—she tells me—I trust I am not wrong in betraying the child's secret—that she is devoted to you."

"Are you sure of it? Avis is not mistaking the impulses of her kind and affectionate heart? She thinks she has cause to be grateful to me, poor little thing. It is not that?"

The priest smiled.

"I am bitterly grieved that it should have come about in this way; but one had not to be a very profound student of human nature to see that it was inevitable—at least on Avis's side. I should have thought on yours."

"You know, that as a boy I was in love with her mother? Calf-love if you will, but it went pretty deep at the time. Perhaps that has kept me from falling in love with Avis. Her mother's daughter! Perhaps my feeling for her has something of the paternal."

He smiled a wry smile as he said it, a smile that did not suggest happiness or mirth.

"A man in the thirties does not have a

paternal affection for a beautiful girl of nineteen. Remember, I only say if it were possible. If there is no one else. There is no reason why you should be sacrificed, quite the contrary. You have been Avis's benefactor as well as her mother's. If the world chose to fling its slime over your generosity—why, that is no fault of yours."

But all the time his voice, his eyes, pleaded for Avis.

Bretherton laughed shortly.

"Poor little Avis! I agree with you that a man ought not to be reluctant to marry her. I could imagine, if I were ten years younger. You are sure that woman said the child cared? If she does—why there is nothing else. God knows, I never tried to make her care. I never thought of such a thing. She is a child to me."

"It was not your fault," the priest said again. "Such things have a way of springing up unbidden."

"I am the last man in the world to go about winning the hearts of young girls," Bretherton said with some bitterness. "As a matter of fact, I am not greatly interested in the *jeune fille*, in that way. I like girls as I like children."

A sudden thought came to him of his days

as a detrimental, when the mothers had trusted him with Peggy and Betty and Joan, and sometimes, despite his impeccability the young ladies had proved troublesome. With the thought he fell silent. Then he took up his top hat and began smoothing the nap, as men will do even at a grave-side: and this was the funeral of his hopes.

"What are you going to do?" the priest asked anxiously.

"I am going down to Honeywells to ask Avis to be my wife."

Father Darley drew a deep breath of relief.

"I am sure it is the right thing, my son. And I can trust Avis for the rest. If you do not love her now you will love her, you must love her. God will bless your marriage."

"She is far above my deserts," Bretherton said in a formal way, which perturbed the priest afterwards more than if he had protested his unwillingness.

Father Darley went with him to the door and paused, his hand on the door-handle.

"She ought to leave Honeywells," he said. "If the thing came to her ears, poor innocent child, it would kill her. Only her seclusion from her kind has made it possible to keep it from her. At any moment she may discover it."

"Where is she to go to, in the interval that must precede our marriage? I don't want it to be a hole-and-corner affair."

"She might . . . what about Mrs. Harding, your cousin's widow? She would be the proper person to take Avis under her wing. She is a kind, motherly person?"

The change in Bretherton's face betrayed him. Again he was brushing his hat carefully with his coat sleeve.

"I should hardly describe her in that way," he said. "She is quite young. But, I should not . . . ask her to have Avis. I have . . . no right. You know, I did not accept my cousin's marriage in the proper spirit?"

"I know, I know," said the priest hastily. "I thought that had all been made up and forgiven. But, in the absence of relatives I think my sister, Lady Rodney, would look after Avis. She is daughterless. I will see her about it at once."

So they parted. There was an hour before the next train for Woodhay. Bretherton found himself a seat in the Park, far away from the Row and the crowds of people, fashionable and otherwise. He had the seat to himself: it was under a flowering may-tree and he looked from it across an expanse of dirty London grass which a flock of dirty

London sheep was contentedly nibbling. Across the flowering chestnuts in the distance he saw the roofs and chimney-pots of London. A miserable vagrant lay stretched fast asleep on a seat close at hand. The perky London sparrows strutted about at his feet. Else he was in a solitude.

He had stumbled so unawares upon this pit, dug in the happy road of his life, that he was stunned. Things were blurred before his eyes. He tried to think consecutively and could not till the scent of the may smote on his senses and stabbed him with a fierce, passionate pain. Only last night they had crossed the Common hand in hand, he guiding her because there was darkness about them. The night had been full of scents, lilac, syringa, the sweet gorse, the wild thyme under their feet: sharpest of all the intoxicating sweetness of the may.

He groaned aloud, and the vagrant on the neighbouring seat got up stealthily on his elbow to look. What trouble *could* the toff have to make that row over?

With the sharp stab of the scent, as though the thorns of the may had made a bed for his heart, the faculty of consecutive thought returned to him. He saw what he had to do. If Avis accepted him, poor child—and she

would have to accept him—then he must tell Lizzie. God knows what feeling had been growing up in her untouched heart for him. Yes—untouched, for she had never been his cousin's except by a tender daughterly affection. There had been looks and words. Oh, but she had held herself proudly in check. This daughter of peasants had had a finer sense than many a lady. She was not going to give herself easily, nor to forget that she was but a new widow. One moment his heart gave a quick exultant throb as he thought she was already his: the next moment it fell like a lifeless thing to the earth. He was panic-stricken for that beginning of love in her. He could have prayed, passionately, vehemently, the words falling over each other, that he might have been mistaken, that she had not begun to care for him.

The vagrant shambled to his side, asked him for a coin. He put his hand in his pocket, took out half-a-crown and flung it to him. Poor gin-sodden wretch! Of course the half-crown would go to purchase a few hours of forgetfulness. Well, many a civilized man with generations of training behind him had been glad to buy oblivion in the same way or worse. He almost envied the poor wretch who could win his Lethe so easily.

Suddenly he became aware that in the shadows of the trees a good many such waifs and strays who had been stretched on the grass dead asleep were come alive. The queer mist in his eyes had perhaps prevented his noticing them before. The heads were lifted watching him with a tense expectation. News of the half-crown seemed to have penetrated even through sleep and the face-downward position on the grass in which so many of them had lain.

It was time for him to go. Before the scattered units had reached the point of concentrating upon him he was gone, striding with long steps—to all appearances the incarnation of happy good-fortune, across the unclean grass towards Hyde Park Corner.

CHAPTER XX

Avis received him with a certain consciousness which he had never seen in her before. He was not sure it pleased him; but if it was true that she was in love with him consciousness must follow. Poor little Avis, he liked her better in the frank friendliness of old.

If his senses had not been blunted by the pain and trouble that lay behind his tired eyes it might have occurred to him that the blush and the lowered eyes conveyed no real assurance of the happy girl in love, too much absorbed in the love itself at the moment, too satisfied with it, to think of return. He had known that dreamy stage in the girls of his acquaintance, a stage which had not got beyond the rose-coloured glamour of being in love. If he had had eyes to see he might have seen that Avis's blush had a certain shrinking behind it, that there was something of fear in her sidelong glances in his direction.

She had delayed a little to welcome him, and aking advantage of his intimacy he strolled out

into the garden which was in its first fresh greenness, as yet a little arid in the wide beds because so much was to come. He strolled down the pleached garden alley, between espaliered apple trees on which the tight pink buds were just opening. The day was blue and sunny, and all the birds were in song. Avis's little dog nosed about at his heels and he stooped to pet the little hard head amid the silky grey hair. A pair of white doves were preening themselves on the edge of the stone basin in which the gold and silver fish swam round and round. A pretty innocent place. A thousand, thousand pities the coarseness and hideousness of man's evil imaginations had had power to enter into such a paradise.

The day was prematurely hot and the encircling hills lay under a mist of heat. There was Avis coming down the garden-path towards him, lingering a little, in a dress of cool green linen which matched well with the chestnut shades in her hair and her bright complexion. It struck him all of a sudden that she had dressed for him. He liked better the old Avis who had come flying downstairs, helter-skelter, at the sound of his arrival, often in an admired disorder as regarded her dress, ready to fling herself on him in frank, childish raptures of welcome.

This Avis had nothing to say. Lunch was a more silent meal than it had ever been at Honeywells, and what talk there was was somewhat lifeless and formal. Adams, waiting at table, departed from her usual habit of a professional lifelessness and suggested subjects for conversation in a manner that savoured of the officious. She was like a well-meaning nurse who makes suggestions to the shy child sitting with fingers in the mouth when there are visitors in the nursery.

"Tell Mr. Bretherton of the thrush's nest in the elm-tree, Miss Avis."

"Miss Avis has learned a new song for you, Mr. Bretherton."

"Have you heard, sir, how the young gentleman at the Vicarage was so kind to Miss Avis when his dog barked at a sleeping tramp and the man jumped up and caught the poor little faithful thing by the throat and was for killing him? Mr. Douglas argued with the tramp too, downright reasonable, and made the man feel ashamed of himself. Very sensible, wasn't it, sir, instead of frightening poor Miss Avis out of her life by having a row with the man?"

Bretherton agreed that it was most sensible. He did not, as he would have done a while since, warn Avis against going into lonesome places

now that the fine weather had come and the tramps were on pilgrimage. What did it matter when she was going to be Lady Rodney's guest—no more an unprotected thing with a touch of wildness about her, given to wandering at her own free will.

For the first time his attention was attracted towards Adams. He had hitherto taken her for granted as Avis's faithful servant and friend. Now he glanced at her with something of the legal acumen with which he was once credited. It was a good face enough but a narrow face, with a suggestion of slyness in the drooping eyes, of opinionatedness in the tight lips. He was glad when, having given them their dessert and set their coffee on a table just outside the window, she took herself off to the kitchen.

As small things will come into the mind in the moment of big things he wondered what they were going to do with Adams. Of course she ought to go with Avis. She was a link with the past, with Avis's dead mother. She had proved herself disinterested and faithful. One of Rose Bourne's confidences in those last days had been that Adams had served them without wages after the loss of fortune, had even offered her savings for her employers to use as they would. Impossible to pension

off such a one. And yet he was not sure he liked the woman. She had a silken manner towards himself which he abhorred, and she treated Avis like a child. On the other hand she did as much for Avis as she could for a child of her own, even to making the pretty garments which adorned the girl's beauty with their simplicity as more elaborate garments might not have done. He remembered that there had been some difficulty in making Adams accept the services of a village child to help her in the work of the house. Impossible, he concluded, with a galled feeling, ever to get rid of Adams.

He was absent-minded. His thoughts kept working on many things besides the thing he was going to say to Avis. There was Giltraps. He would have to give up Giltraps. He had grown fond of the place since he had re-modelled it—but Giltraps was too near Littlecombe Hall. And after all what did a house matter? There were hundreds of houses to be had as good as Giltraps. He might get nearer town. Not in Surrey. He revolted at the thought of living here where they had slandered his poor little girl. The recollection of it blurred the fair valley landscape with its encircling hills. They must get away from Surrey. Honeywells must go as well

as Giltraps. He feared Avis would not like parting with Honeywells—but she would have to do it, poor child. He must make up to her for it.

"Come and show me the thrush's nest, Avis," he said, getting up from the table.

She came and walked with him, not thrusting her hand through his arm in the happy confidence of old. She walked sedately side by side with him down the garden path while he noticed the change in her and wondered. Did consciousness come so suddenly as all that?

He remembered the last time,—that unlucky day of February which had brought so much trouble in its train,—how she had laughed and chattered and run on before and come back to him. What was it that had brought about the change? These months of absence? She had written and reproached him,—as though he had been a dear elderly guardian or Father Darley; and he had said to himself for many days and weeks past, "Next week for certain I shall run down to see Avis." He had not come because Freddy Vernon's manner that day they met had somehow given him to taste of the fruits of the tree, to realize that Avis was a beautiful girl and he a man still young. So he had postponed coming from day to day,

sending her instead gifts of music and books and sweets to show he had not forgotten her.

"Shall we have time to walk up the hill?" she asked, formally.

"Oh, no, no," he said, "not the hill"; and was aware that she looked at him in some wonder.

He glanced at his watch.

"I shall have to get an early train back," he said. "Take me into the wilderness and let us sit down."

He was conscious of the deliberateness of it all. If she had been the beloved woman he would have taken her into his arms then and there. Now he felt like a stock or a stone. Her girlish beauty and charm had no power to make his leaden pulses move a whit the faster.

When he spoke it was with a dull constraint.

"Avis," he said, "I have come to ask you to marry me. Can you say yes, dear? If you can, God helping me, I will try to be a good husband to you."

If it had been the beloved woman he need not have asked. He would have taken her in his arms and there would have been no need for questions.

He stood regarding the girl's face gravely, almost sadly. She looked down, from side to side, with an air as though she would run away;

then towards the gable of the house which showed between the arched trees. They were too far to see the curtain of the window in the gable move or the hand that held it back. There was a momentary pause, long enough to let the blackbird on the apple-tree sing through a whole bar of his song. Then she spoke.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked; and still her eyes were unsteady as though at any moment she might take to flight,—"quite, quite sure? You think you really want me?"

There was no increase of colour in her cheek; rather she was paler than usual.

"If you are quite sure, Ralph," she said—he had taught her to call him Ralph—"I am ready to say yes."

Her way of receiving an offer of marriage struck him as being odd. He took up her hand and kissed it. The fingers were cold.

"What an unbelieving child it is!" he said, with an air of tender mockery.

The colour rushed to her cheeks, the tears to her eyes.

"I wanted to be quite sure," she said. "Of course I don't know about such things; but it has never occurred to me that you could be in love with me, could want me for your wife. Since you do,—oh, Ralph, I must give you what you ask since it is for your happiness."

"And your own?" he asked, chafing the cold hands which were so much softer and more delicate than those other hands he remembered.

"Yes, of course, for my own," she said: and added, "I owe you everything."

"Then the next time I come I shall bring you a fetter," he went on with an attempt at playfulness,—"the forerunner of the fetter that is to bind us for ever." He smoothed back her hair with a careful tenderness and stooping kissed her cold cheek. How cold it was since the colour had ebbed away!

"Come and sit down here," he said, drawing her towards the seat. "I want you to tell me—how long will it take to buy your frills and furbelows? That is essential, is it not? But it need not take very long. Don't give me a long day, Avis."

She remained standing, resisting his endeavours to draw her down beside him. He was baffled by the expression of her eyes. Was it possible that he was not to have even the satisfaction of feeling that he made her happy? God help him, if he must make that other, dearer than himself, unhappy with himself and not even save out of the wreck of it all the happiness of the girl whom he had innocently compromised!

"Think about it, child," he said, caressing

her hand. He was giving up his dearest hopes for her; and unexpectedly the sacrifice had a drop of honeyed sweetness at the bottom of the cup. He was fond of Avis and because she was the cause of so much grief to him she was dearer still. If only she would look happier!

> "If she love me this believe
> I will die ere she shall grieve."

But if he did not make her happier by the marriage, then,—why the sweet would be bitter indeed!

He was not in a mood to be buttonholed by Adams as he went away. Somehow or other Avis had slipped away from him, leaving him to go without any farewells. The woman found his hat and stick and opened the door for him. Before he could cross its threshold she spoke.

"I would take Miss Avis away out of this as soon as possible, sir," she said.

After all the woman was Rose Bourne's confidential servant who had served her ungrudgingly without fee or reward. All he knew of her should have made him regard her with respect and admiration. His consciousness of the unreasonable antipathy which he had conceived for her of late made his manner gentler.

He flushed darkly, thinking of the scandal

at which she hinted obliquely, and answered her steadily.

"I am quite of your opinion," he said. "So also is Father Darley. He suggests that Miss Bourne should stay with his sister, Lady Rodney, till we are married."

"And what's to become of me?" she asked, with a sudden shrillness in her voice.

He looked at her in surprise. She had always had perfectly the manner of the trained servant.

"You?" he said. "We—don't propose to part you from your mistress. There is the question of who is to take charge here. Of course, if Avis wants you with her at Lady Rodney's, no doubt——"

"The poor lamb!" said Adams, with an incredible bitterness. "'Tisn't likely, sir, I'm going to let her go among that lot without me to look after her. Beggin' your pardon, sir"—plainly she had taken the bit between her teeth from the way she tossed her head at him. He hardly recognized the suave upper servant he had known. "I don't hold with them Romans. They 'ticed the poor mistress away; and now like as not 'tis the Convent 'ud have the poor lamb and not you, sir, if so be that she was to go among them unprotected. I never could a-bear them—not since I was a little kid and

my poor mother told me how the Romans persecuted us Christians under that first Pope they had, which his name was Nero. I know them. I must say, sir, I'd never have expected you to send Miss Avis among the likes of them. Take care you don't lose her, that's all I say."

He was astounded as well as amused; and astonishment had the upper hand of amusement.

"Miss Avis will be quite safe with Lady Rodney," he said. "But, perhaps, in the circumstances, it would be unwise for you to go with her. You had better stay on here and act as caretaker. I don't want to shut up the house."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," said Adams, with a flushed face, "how soon is Miss Avis to go to this place?"

"As soon as Lady Rodney is ready to receive her."

He waited to hear no more but went on his way. Again and again in the sad medley of his thoughts Adams's face came before him. What on earth did the woman mean? One expression after another had passed over the narrow face. The final expression had been one of malignity for himself, with a certain secret pleasure as though she saw a way of

paying off old scores. But he was too desperately unhappy, too full of the next thing he had to do to consider Adams's case with any seriousness, or to find her anger anything but ridiculous.

CHAPTER XXI

On his way to Paddington in the morning Bretherton stopped his cab to post a registered letter. It contained a case which held the ring that had been his mother's engagement ring—a large, milky pearl, set round with little diamonds; within it a posy:

"Thine am I
Till I die."

Waiting for the receipt for the registered letter he recalled to himself how his mother had always concealed the secret of the posy. Only when he had drawn it from her hand in her last illness had he discovered it.

"It was a secret between me and your father, Ralph," she had said, regarding him out of her dying eyes. "May it be as true of your wife as it has been of me."

He was glad when the ring was despatched. It was the outward and visible sign of the link that bound him to Avis; and he was glad with a sense of its irrevocableness, that now it was done and there was no turning back.

He was going to tell Lizzie himself. It was an ordeal from which he shrank. How would she take it? How would her dear eyes regard him? He felt sure of her magnanimity and her kindness. And in spite of everything little waves of joy flowed over him, flooding the secret places of his soul, at the thought that he was going to see her. He tried to remember: tried to chill the joy he had no right to with a cold reminder of the time coming when he should see her no more; but his mind was tired. He had suffered many emotions during the last day, the last night when he had tossed feverishly on his pillow when he had but to close his eyes and visions of her face came to him, sweet as water-wells to a man dying of thirst.

He would not sleep till he had told her, but he had no confidence of finding her at home in the afternoon. She would be out riding or it might be paying some of the courtesy calls which had been necessary of late, since the county had found out that Mrs. Harding had been summed up too lightly and had re-considered its attitude. Her nature was too simple and sweet not to forgive easily if she found any need of forgiveness; but, indeed, the county's defection had had no great power to hurt her as its friendliness had no power to elate her.

She had even said to the Duchess of Frant, who apologized gaily for half-a-dozen years of neglect that she had had no time to visit, "putting the boot on the other foot," as her Grace said delightedly.

He had a sudden inspiration of where he would or might find her. In the park of Littlecombe was her dairy, built over a flowing stream which was led by conduit pipes to flow in troughs around her pans of milk. She had her herd of Alderneys in the park; and it had been one of her occupations to do some of the work of the dairy herself. She did not at all play at it like a fine lady. She had explained once to Bretherton that she loved the dairy because it recalled her early days on her father's little farm. "Often," she had said, "I used to think of the dairy, and the green across the windows and the swishing of the water and the sweet smell of the cream, when Edward had had bad nights and his head ached so that we had to sit through the day in a darkened room."

It had been in the early days of their acquaintance and it struck him all of a sudden that here was something of the other side of the story. The world had thought of her great advancement. It had not thought of her in her fresh and vigorous youth, snatched from

her fields and garden to be the constant companion of a sick man, condemned, for the latter years of her married life at all events, to spend most of her life tied to a sick bed, in close attendance on an invalid whose nerves were so racked that a sound above a whisper was torture.

About 5 o'clock, as he knew, the milk from the afternoon milking would be brought in. She liked, if she could, to strain it herself and set the pans for cream. He had admired her strength which had refused his aid in lifting the brimming pails. There was something soothing about that quiet strength of hers. Of late there had been a subtle change in her—she had looked rosier, fresher, partly attributable no doubt to the greater freedom, to the more of open air she had enjoyed since her husband's death.

He found her at the dairy as he had anticipated. Old Bruce lying across the threshold told him as he approached that she was there. He patted the dog as he passed within. She was swathed around in a big apron which seemed somehow to display and not to conceal the beauty of her form. She was being attended by a little Hebe in a pink frock. There was a long golden sunset which had made the standing blades of grass as he walked before it

shine like golden silk. It was pouring in at the dairy-door as he approached it; and he entered blinking for the dimness after so much gold.

She was standing between the flooding gold and the cool green light of the window which looked into a tangle of boughs. The sun was on one side of her face and neck. She was acquiring a wholesome tan instead of the pallor she had had when he had first seen her. The place smelt deliciously of fresh milk; the sound of running water, the songs of the birds outside, were very pleasant.

"So you have come back," she said; as though his coming were the most natural thing in the world. "I am just finished. You can go now, Zilpah. Call at the Hall on your way back for the chicken-jelly for your mother."

She was unpinning her sleeves, rolled high above her elbows as she spoke. For the first time he saw her arms, beautiful arms, round and firm, white above the tanned hands. As she held them out with unconscious grace he smelt the milk that had run over her hands. He remembered that she always liked to milk Daisy, who was restive with any one but her.

"Patience!" she said, smiling at him as the tight sleeve began to come down.

The girl in the pink frock took a jug of milk

and a little basket covered with white muslin and departed, with a good-night to Mrs. Harding and a demure dip to Bretherton.

"For a reward you shall have a glass of milk warm from the cow," Mrs. Harding said, the last roll coming out of the sleeve. She began to untie the holland apron. He was watching her with a dazed look. "What a woman!" he said to himself. Somehow his passion had risen. A sudden rush of self-pity came over him. What a woman! What a breast to pillow a man's head. She was a woman of soft and flowing outlines. What arms to go about a man's neck! This was his mate. What did he want with an immature child, however dear, however charming?

He took the glass of milk from her hand, drank it and put the glass down again. He watched her while she rinsed it in the stream, dried it on a white cloth and restored it to its place.

She gave a little pat to her hair. He liked the touch, it was so feminine.

"Now I am ready," she said.

She had been dazzling him. As they turned to go it came to him with an intolerable rush of grief and pain, the thing he had to tell her. How would she take it? He felt that his eyes, his voice must have been telling her for

some time past that he was keeping his passion within bounds. No more than that. Would she suffer? He did not want her to suffer, and yet his whole heart cried out against the indifference her not suffering would betoken.

He walked along beside her, his head bent, his hands clasped behind his back. The dog followed them quietly. His eyes ached. There was a blur on the golden evening and the golden-green forest aisles. He did not know how he was going to begin to tell her.

Here in the solitude was the time and the place. He tried to brace himself; moistened his dry lips, glanced at the grave and sweet nobility of her profile; and no words would come.

She helped him at last.

"There is something the matter," she said. "What is it? Sit down here and tell me. Is it anything I can help?"

Looking up he recognized dimly the same glade where they had sat and talked last February. She had chosen the very same tree-trunk to sit upon. It was marked with a number in white, 264. He remembered idly that day having noticed the number.

She made a place for him on the log, looking up at him with something of a maternal anxiety in her large, soft gaze.

"Come and tell me," she said again.

He uttered a little cry. Something of the hard tensity of his suffering seemed to relax. He flung himself on his knees before her, forgetting everything but that he loved her and that her way with him was kind and pitiful. He laid his head in her lap. He felt her hands pass over his hair, tenderly caressing. There was balm in the touch, healing, but not for his wound. He must tell her. It was an outrage to let her betray herself like this. She was not one to caress a man unless she loved him.

After the first moment of abandonment he lifted his head. He struggled to his feet. He stood with a hanging head before her.

"My dear," he said, "I have done you a great wrong, for I am pledged to marry another woman. I am the most unhappy man alive, for I want only you. Listen and I will tell you how it has happened."

He had not meditated telling her the story, but it came pouring from his lips. After all there was nothing else to be done. It was due to her to tell her why he loved her and must yet marry some one else.

After the first words she had covered her face with her hands. He noticed, wondering at himself for noticing, that she wore no rings,

nothing except her wedding ring and that thin, of fine pale gold. It had belonged to Edward Harding's mother. He seemed to realize for the first time that she never wore jewels.

As the story went on she took her hands from before her eyes and looked up at him and her gaze was kind. The tale stumbled along to its close. He wanted to lay all his justification before her and he talked hurriedly, his face turned away after that first glance at her.

"I wish you had brought her to me," she said, when a pause came. "Now, I'm afraid it is too late. Poor Ralph! But you will be happy some day. I think I'll be going homeward."

"You'd rather I didn't walk with you?" he said, humbly.

"Why?" she asked, turning her full beneficent gaze upon him. "You can walk with me to the gate if you will. Don't think of it, Cousin Ralph, that you've done me a wrong. I couldn't say anything but that you are doing the right thing."

He walked with her to the gate that led out of the wood into the park and there he said good-bye to her. When she had gone, not looking back, he stood in the shadow of the wood staring after her. The dog, after

lingering uneasily by him for a while, had gone with her. She went with a down-bent head. He had hurt her. It wrung his heart to think that she too must suffer, and yet, something in him that would not be kept in check was exultant.

It was good-bye. If he had not forced her to that self-betrayal he might have stayed, come and gone perhaps at Littlecombe and kept the mask on, bearing the suffering of seeing her because of the joy. Now it was his last glimpse of her as she was, as he was. When they met again, some time in the remote future perhaps, their old selves would be as dead as this day.

He watched her, the dog shambling after her, cross the park under the trees which sent their long shadows across the sward. Now the shadow swallowed her up ; again she emerged into the light. She walked swiftly and strongly, a creature of whom nature had had the framing, who had known no artificial bonds, till at last she turned the corner of a spinney and was lost to sight.

When he had seen the last of her he turned back to the place where they had sat together. A man in love, a woman in love, will do strange things. He went to the place where she had sat and lay down with his face in the

grass where her feet had rested, her skirt had trailed. He kissed the ground, seeming to get from it some faint fragrance of her presence.

The shadows grew longer and longer in the wood. The sun set in splendour beyond the trees. The wood which had been all golden when they entered it became dim. The birds were singing their sweetest before going asleep. An hour, two hours, three hours, four hours, passed over his head. Perhaps he slept. He had tossed miserably awake all last night. When he came awake at last the wood was suffused with the pale light of the moon and the nightingales were singing.

There was a strange, bruised sweetness somewhere close to him. He knew it for woodruff. There was a little plant of it just where he had lain. Ever afterwards he would associate woodruff with Lizzie Harding and his hours of suffering.

He got to his feet, a little ashamed of himself after the manner of the civilized man because of his abandonment. He remembered that he had left his bag at the station to be sent on. He hoped they had not sent it, else the servants would be alarmed. He took out his watch and tried to see what o'clock it was by the light of the moon; but he could not

make out the hands on the dial-face. While he lit a match to see it the church clock half a mile away began to strike. He counted the strokes, flinging the match away—ten o'clock. It was not so late after all. No one would wonder at his arrival at that hour. Unless his bag had been sent over they would conclude that he had come down by a late train.

He gave himself a shake, wondering if he presented a disordered aspect. He felt intolerably tired, aching with fatigue. He hoped he would sleep to-night—that the nightingales would not be too clamorous. If he had a good night's sleep he thought he could begin to face things to-morrow. He was not so sleepy that vague thoughts did not flash into his mind. He imagined himself telling Dixon that he was going to get rid of Giltraps. It was too small; all very well for a bachelor establishment, but—he was going to be married.

He imagined how Dixon would look. Not surprised. To be sure people had talked about his intimacy at the Hall, putting the obvious construction upon it. It was not likely that the servants had not considered the matter. He imagined himself hurrying on, explaining that he was about to be married to

Miss Avis Bourne, stopping the misunderstanding in Dixon's mind as quickly as might be.

Mechanically he put his hand into his breast-pocket for his cigar-case, took it out, felt for a cigar with his fingers and lit a match. As it spurted up and he held it to the end of the cigar, the light was on his face. He inhaled a couple of whiffs of the cigar ; it might as well have been cabbage-leaf as Havana. He went on, the fiery spot that was the end of the cigar making a red spot in the darkness.

Suddenly there was a report, close at hand. Something struck him. There was a smell of powder, and a sharp burning pain in his thigh. He had been shot. He clapped his hand to the place. The blood was oozing. He felt it thick and clammy on his hand. He went on a few steps blindly. Then stumbled and fell forward.

CHAPTER XXII

During the hours of the May night Bretherton all but bled to death. The shot had severed one of the smaller blood-vessels and when he was discovered by a keeper in the early hours of the morning he was lying in a pool of his own blood, chill with the frosts of the May night and but semi-conscious.

He was carried to Littlecombe Hall and put to bed and by evening delirium had set in. The wound was poisoned with the frost and for a few days things looked somewhat serious. The man who fired the shot had given himself up. It was Harry Sprague, the gamekeeper. His defence was that he had fired at a poacher, as he thought, but had found no one when he went in the direction of his shot.

It was some time before Bretherton took any interest in his surroundings. In fact the year was older by some three weeks before he opened his eyes and looked round the spacious room so unlike the little, flowery

up-and-down rooms of Giltraps, while slow recognition grew in his gaze.

A few days later and his convalescence was well advanced. There was a nurse in charge. At the worst Lizzie had relieved the nurse at night. She came and went in his dreams of those burning agonizing nights. Afterwards it was like the memory of a dream. She had been angelic to him—soothing, comforting him, answering him softly when he babbled in delirium. There was another woman, the trained nurse, in that troubled dream, a formal, tired woman who rendered him many services without a word, with a patient, indifferent air. There was the doctor, a grave face by the bedside. Lizzie always came quietly into the dream about the time the pain was at its worst. It had been worth the pain that shot like burning shafts of fire through his veins and his members to have her come in—so composed, so tender, so pitiful. Was it a dream or a reality that his head had been pillowed on her breast, such a soft motherly breast, that she had kissed him and soothed him into quietness?

Perhaps it was a dream. With the convalescence she was still there, kind, smiling, but always with an aloofness which had not been in his dream. He did not require a

night-nurse any longer. The nurse slept in a dressing-room off his. And Lizzie only came to ask him how he felt, to talk a little and go away. She brought him books and papers. He had no fever now and could read. One day she brought writing materials. "There will be some one you want to write to," she said. "I'll do it for you unless you'd rather have the nurse do it."

"Please do it, you," he said, and lay watching her while she fetched a table to the bedside and settled herself to write. He began dictating the letter—to Father Darley. It told of his accident briefly. "I trust you to see to things till I am well enough, which I hope will be in a few days. Please let Avis know."

"Is that all?" she asked, her pen suspended in mid-air. She had written slowly and carefully. She would never have the pen of the ready-writer.

"That is all," he said, "except the address." He spoke as though the effort tired him. While she addressed the envelope he lay watching her profile, with a sense of restful satisfaction in her presence.

She closed the envelope and laid it on one side: took another sheet of paper and prepared to write.

"Well?" she said, turning about to smile at

him. She looked a little pale it struck him. "I am ready."

"There is nothing else," he answered her, watching her through half-closed lids.

"But Miss . . . Miss . . . Won't she be wild with fear? I didn't think it well to trouble you with letters before; but now the wound is healing so nicely."

"Father Darley will let her know," he said, indifferently.

"Oh, but you must write," she pleaded as though it were her own affair. "The poor thing! How she must suffer from not hearing of you."

"She doesn't suffer," he said; and he had a sense of a sudden revelation. "Perhaps girls like Avis don't love as men and women like us love, Lizzie. That woman Adams vowed she was head over ears in love with me. Perhaps it was what was lacking in myself. I could have sworn that she was on the point of saying 'No' when she said 'Yes.'"

Mrs. Harding's face was turned away from him. Her hand propped and hid her cheek: but he saw her neck flush and could guess at what was hidden from him.

"You're sure it won't be unkind not to write?" she said, in her soft deliberate way.

"If I had to write to another woman, Lizzie, as her lover, do you think I would ask *you* to do it?"

The nurse came into the room, perhaps opportunely, rustling with cleanliness and starch, and prepared to read to Mr. Bretherton. She had read to him before, with a clipped speech suggestive of the North of Ireland and with a *flair* for picking the horrid things in the newspaper.

"Perhaps Mrs. Harding will do it, nurse," he said, with what he felt to be the manner of the hypocrite. "I know you have your letters to write, for you told me so."

"If Mrs. Harding would be so kind," the nurse said, and retired to her dressing-room with a slight air of affront.

"Why didn't you let her?" Mrs. Harding asked, distressed. "I don't read very well. Even still, for all the trouble Edward took with me, I don't pronounce some of the words quite rightly. And I am so slow."

"I like slow reading."

He found an article in the *Times* and gave it to her to read. It was one of the beautiful occasional articles which are a feature of the paper, and this one was concerned with the plants and flowers that grow by the wayside. It was full of minute and delicate observation,

of knowledge and love, and it was written in simple and limpid English.

He lay lazily watching her while she forgot her shyness in the illumination the article gave her. There was always something ruminant about her manner. She paused between the sentences as though to take them in and the light on her face broadened and widened.

"This man, whoever he is, knows a deal about the country," she said, midway through the article. "I couldn't have said it nor even thought it; but 'tis true, every word of it."

"Go on," he said. "I want to hear the rest of it."

"Don't I read very badly?" she asked.

"You read excellently. I never lose a word."

He smiled to himself over the little mispronunciations as one smiles over the misunderstandings of children and grieves when they are corrected.

She read steadily through to the end; then she read a leading article.

"Let us talk a while," he said. "Your voice is beginning to tire."

"Oh no," she answered hastily. "I used to read to Edward for hours. He was very patient with me, as you are; I was a worse reader then and he used to stop me and correct me.

He said he liked my voice, else he could have had some one to come and read to him as Mr. Trant proposed."

"I shouldn't mind if you read to me for ever," he murmured, lying with closed eyes and an air of dreamy content.

She looked as though she would rebuke him; but her face softened, as a mother's might over a fractious child. After all he was ill, had been very ill. They had thought to lose him. If he was letting his conscience sleep for a while, if he was trying her almost intolerably, she must bear with him for the time till he was stronger. She would never think to reproach him. But she would not be drawn to talk. She preferred to read; it was safer. So she read on till he slept.

As he grew stronger she absented herself more and more from the sick room. Presently he was downstairs on a sofa, and it was only a matter of a few days before he should be removed to Giltraps. She came in one morning and stood by the side of his sofa, a rose she had plucked between her fingers.

"Is it for me?" he asked, putting out his hand for it.

"It was broken with its own weight," she answered, giving it to him, "and the weight of the rain that fell last night."

He put the rose in his coat. Once more he was able to do things for himself.

"I am going back to Giltraps to-morrow," he said.

"So soon? Does the doctor think you fit to be moved?"

"I don't mean to ask him. I am going. I can't stay here any longer—as things are, Lizzie."

She said nothing, only gazed out of the window at the coppice which hid the black destruction of the Common beyond. For this year the Common had lost its beauty; but next year it would be if anything more beautiful for the scarifying fires that had burnt up the old undergrowth and left room for the new to start. There was no disturbance in her face. The sweetness of her resigned lips maddened him.

He snatched at her hand roughly and flung it away from him.

"What stuff are women made of?" he asked bitterly. "Resignation, fortitude, endurance. A man when he is in love doesn't know the meaning of the words. He's got to endure somehow, but I believe you women like it. I shall go to-day."

She turned on him a look more eloquent than any spoken reproaches could have been and he was ashamed.

"Never mind, Lizzie," he said; "bear with me. I'm going to try to be decent in future. The only way is to keep away since I can't trust myself when I am with you. I shan't see you any more after to-day."

It was her turn to look disturbed.

"Surely, some day," she began. "I have been looking forward . . . I could love your wife."

"I know," he said, "a woman's way of loving what hurts her. Pressing her breast on a thorn and all that sort of thing . . ."

With a sudden inarticulate cry more like an animal's in pain than anything else, he caught at a fold of her skirt and kissed it, kept his face covered for a few seconds with it while she strove gently to withdraw it. At last he dropped it of his own accord and looked up at her: his eyes were wet and full of blood.

"You see how fit I am to be trusted," he said. "You ought to turn me out. I am going back to Giltraps to-day. I've been writing this morning to put it on the agents' books."

"What a pity!" she said, "and you were so fond of it."

"So am I fond of Littlecombe," he said, "with you in it. But I shall see it no more. I know myself better than you do. I hope . . .

I am . . . going to be . . . a tolerably decent sort of husband . . . and . . . at least a hundred miles or so . . . must separate you and me."

There was a knock at the door and the doctor was announced. He was too professionally discreet to pretend to notice the disturbance he found in the faces of the two people before him. Feeling Bretherton's pulse he made no comment on the fact that it was wildly irregular.

Later on he saw Mrs. Harding in another room.

"Mr. Bretherton is very keen to return to his own house," he said, "and I have given my consent, because it is often wiser to take a little risk in one direction than to upset the patient. However, I think he will be quite safe now. A rather nervous and excitable temperament, I fancy."

"My husband always said that Mr. Bretherton had great control of himself," Mrs. Harding said with an averted gaze.

"Ah, exactly,—great control. But sometimes the control slackens; it may be something of a continuous effort. Anyhow it will be better to let him do as he wishes."

In his own mind he had a theory as to why a man should wish to leave a place so desirable

as Littlecombe Hall, with such a hostess; for the doctor was a sensitive person, and although his heart was quite true to the mother of his nine children he was nevertheless sensible of another woman's beauty and goodness.

"They can't hit it off apparently," he said to himself as he drove homewards; "and yet, and yet,—I can't for the life of me see which is the unwilling one."

CHAPTER XXIII

For some ten days longer Bretherton fumed and fretted at Giltraps, making the lives of Dixon and Mrs. Dixon unbearable to them; so that at last the usually imperturbable man-servant as he opened the door to the doctor one morning was moved to unburden himself.

"I've never known him like it before," he said. "I've packed his bag and unpacked it again every day for the last three days. 'Let it alone, Dixon,' he says, 'the things won't hurt.' 'Beggin' your pardon, sir,' I says, 'I know my business better than that, I 'ope.' If he don't go soon, doctor, he'll be doin' of a mischief to himself or some one else. If it wasn't that I know better I'd say as there was an attraction for him up in London."

"We'll see, we'll see," said the doctor cheerfully. "Perhaps to-morrow. Indeed, I don't think I'll be able to keep him beyond to-morrow."

That evening Dixon coming in for his master's letters for post announced that a man wanted to see Mr. Bretherton.

"What sort of a man?" Bretherton asked irritably. He had never been irritable, so that this new infirmity of temper was the more surprising in him.

"It's,—the gamekeeper over from Littlecombe. Sprague, I think they call him, sir."

"Show him in."

A few seconds later he turned round at the sound of the opening and closing door to find Sprague standing on the threshold, turning his cap about in his hands and looking at him from under his lowered lids.

"Come in and take a seat," he said, standing up and indicating a chair. He was still a little lame from his wound and he dragged when he walked. The fire fell in as he stood looking at Harry Sprague and the red glow illumined the fellow's handsome face. There was a wild beauty of attitude and length of limb about him which spoke of lives lived outside the habitations of men, in the woods and the fields, a sort of Bedouin grace. There was something of the same grace about Lizzie Harding, composed and gentle in her case. For a fleeting minute in the firelight he saw the likeness between the two; then it had vanished.

"What is it?" he asked: and his voice was cold. "What is it?"

Sprague still turned his cap about with a sheepish air.

"If you please, sir," he said, "I'm going to Canada. I've been getting into bad company here. I'll do no good. It don't seem as though I can do good hereabouts."

"Well,"—Sprague had paused, looking down at his boots, apparently seeking inspiration. "Canada is a fine country, but—why do you come to me?"

"Because I want help, sir. I'd good wages where I was, but I've spent them in bad company. I'd pay you back, sir, I would, indeed. It 'ud give me a chance. There's a girl, sir . . ."

"Oh, there's a girl, is there?"

Suddenly he looked at Sprague with an unwonted kindness. Something seemed to have fallen away from before his eyes. He had been seeing evil passions, animal instincts, in the dark, undisciplined face. Now, suddenly shy with confession, it was a good face enough, whatever was wrong in it accidental, not essential.

"So there is a girl?" he said again.

"There is so and she believes in me. I want to break away for her sake from the bad company. I could ask Mrs. Harding,—but I've been a bad lot to her, sir. I . . ."

Bretherton saw the coming confession on the man's lips and held up his hand.

"Better not tell me anything," he said, wondering at his own sudden gentleness of mood. "What you did she would, I am sure, forgive you."

"She hasn't got so much money, sir. She never refuses anyone. Three thousand a year seems a deal to the like o' me. But she keeps up Littlecombe as it was kept in the Squire's day. It takes a deal of money; and she's too good to the villagers. So I come to you."

"Because you shot me," Bretherton said, and laughed shortly. "Very well, I will give you the money. Take it as a gift, not a loan. How much do you want? Fifty pounds?"

The dark face lit up.

"I never thought of as much, sir. But . . . but . . . if you would trust me with it. Her passage-money and my own and a bit to keep us going till I get employment. I was going by myself, sir."

With the sudden kindness growing warmer, chasing away the dark mood which had been on him for some days, Bretherton put a hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Marry the girl and take her with you," he said. "I'm not likely to spend fifty pounds better than in making two people happy."

"Why shouldn't the poor devil be happy?" he asked himself. There was something that touched him in the odd humour of the man's application to him. Perhaps—perhaps, who knew?—he might move whatever gods there be to make his own burden lighter because he had played providence to Harry Sprague.

"When do you go?" he asked.

Sprague was looking at him with an incredulous happiness in his face.

"As soon as Zilpah and me can get married," he said. "There'll be the banns to put up. Zilpah's got none to think of, else maybe she wouldn't be let marry me. She'll make a man of me, sir."

"Is it Zilpah Carey?"

He remembered the pink-cheeked, black-eyed girl who was Mrs. Harding's assistant in the dairy. Lizzie had mentioned to him casually that she was alone in the world, her old granny having died last year.

"It is Zilpah, sir. She'll be praying for you every day she lives. I never troubled church nor chapel, but she's good."

Something in the glowing happiness of the man's face struck Bretherton's heart with a pang of intolerable pain. If he could only have the woman he wanted and go out in the desert

with her! He turned from the thought. That way madness lay.

"You can have the fifty pounds now, Sprague, if you like," he said.

"You trust me, sir."

"Oh, yes, I trust you."

"I ought to go and cut my throat if I wasn't honest now, sir," the man said in an agitated voice. "Perhaps you'd give the money to Zilpah. I can bring her to-morrow."

"It will have to be early, for I go away to-morrow."

"What time, sir? I am glad to hear you're able to be about again."

"Better say nine o'clock, if it suits you and Zilpah."

"Mrs. Harding will give Zilpah leave off. I don't know how to thank you, sir."

"It's all right, Sprague. Keep straight—for Zilpah's sake."

"I will, sir."

Sprague went to the door, his head hanging. With his hand on the door-handle he turned about and came back.

"I want to tell you, sir," he said. "I shot you o' purpose. I knew very well it wasn't no poacher."

"I knew," said Bretherton, calmly. "As a matter of fact you stepped clear of the

tree-trunks as you fired. I saw you by the light of the moon. I knew it was you and that you knew it was me. More, you didn't trouble to look whether I was dead or not."

There was silence in the room while you could count ten.

"You've paid me out now," said Sprague, in a voice of the utmost humility. "I feel that bad that if it wasn't for Zilpah I'd go and shoot myself. It were like this, sir. It were along o' Lizzie, Mrs. Harding, I mean. I was very fond of her in old days. She'd never look at me. Why should she? She was always as high as the stars above me. I'd nought to say when she married Mr. Harding. He were too old for her—but she'd ha' done anything for him. You know what he was, sir. He made her happy in a way. But you, sir, you knew nought o' Lizzie. You thought like the other folk that because she come o' humble folk she were o' no account."

Bretherton made a dumb gesture of deprecation. He could not deny the truth of what the man said.

"I'm not blaming you, sir. You didn't know her. Might ha' been better, perhaps, to wait till you knew her. Squire, he weren't a person to marry commonality. There's nothing common about Lizzie. Well, I hated you

first because you'd despised her. I hated you next because I thought you were playin' with her. 'Tweren't likely to my way o' thinkin' that you'd ha' been as wise as Squire in seein' that Lizzie was no common woman. I watched you with her in the woods. Maybe I misjudged you. I thought she was growin' fond of you. You'd be the first man Lizzie was fond of—in that way. She adored the Squire,—more like a fond daughter. It did well enough for Lizzie. She'd never looked at a man before—in that way. She thought she was in love with him. I believe he married her to lift her where he saw she ought to be. I thought you was goin' to break her heart—Lizzie, that never looked at me or another man. She's as simple as a child. The devil put bad passions in my heart and I shot at you that night. When I'd done it I was frightened enough and I ran away and hid myself. I'd done many bad things but I'd stopped at takin' a life. I had to tell you, sir."

"I'm glad you told me. No one else will ever know."

"I shall have to tell Zilpah. I must start honest with her."

"Ah, well, as you think best. I dare say Zilpah will forgive you. You can tell her you've told me and I forgive."

He put out his hand and the gamekeeper took it and wrung it in his own ; then went out on tiptoe as though the room were a church.

When the door had closed behind him, Bretherton stood leaning his hot forehead on the cold marble of the mantel-piece. He groaned aloud and the spaniel lying on the hearthrug got up and sniffed about him uneasily. What a muddle it all was! He had found the one incomparable woman, saved for him, for him alone it seemed, in her matchless simplicity and innocence ; and he had to go away and leave her to suffer. He said to himself that it was as well he had not known her in her husband's lifetime, since he must have loved her whenever and wherever he had met her, and she him. And now when he had but to stretch his hand and take her in the sight of all men there was this intolerable tangle of things, a spider's web he could not break through. What a muddle it was! What a muddle life was! What a muddle !

CHAPTER XXIV

He made a careful toilet in the morning; as careful as though he were going to his wedding he jeered at himself, standing shaving in front of the glass. The ceilings at Giltraps were low, the little rooms just now full of a green obscurity of leaves. Perhaps it was the shadow, perhaps it was something else that set hollows in his cheeks and by his temples while it showed up clearly the powdering of grey which had grown thicker of late in his brown hair.

He said to himself that he looked villainous, not the least bit in the world a lover for a radiant child like Avis. He might have been ten years older than his real age. Soon he would be showing wrinkles. He wronged himself staring in the old glass. Many a girl of Avis's age would have preferred him before a golden youth. There was something clean and spare and distinguished about his thirty-six years by which the callow youth would have been unformed, unfinished. He would have done well enough for Lizzie, he thought.

Lizzie would not have cared if he were lean and wrinkled and grey. She would have taken his head in her arms and held it to her breast. A child like Avis could not love as a mature woman could.

He had had several letters from Avis, if they could be called letters—short, constrained, formal. He supposed the child was shy, for she had written him delightful letters in the past before there was this bond between them. She did not know he was coming to-day. He had not written to tell her. But he had written to Father Darley and suggested that they should go down together. The priest could always be relied on, he thought, with a bitter mockery of himself, to be discreet, to vanish out of the way of lovers. There was always his Office to be said. He smiled to himself at a memory of Adams's face when he had come upon her suddenly, one day, peering from a shrubbery after the priest as he went down the green walk edged with daffodils, his breviary in his hand. It had been a revelation of narrow fanaticism.

When he turned his back on Giltraps he had no intention of returning. His portmanteau was packed for a stay in town, labelled for the Langham. With such competent servants there would be no need for

him to return. He had but to put the house on the agents' books. The Dixons could be left in charge till it was off his hands or till he needed them. He said to himself,—and his pulses were cold,—that after the wedding he would take Avis abroad and they could roam about the continent till they grew tired of it and desired to settle down at home. It would be long enough before the desire came upon him ; but he was not going to hide away his young wife for too long. Necessarily in spite of what he had said, it would have to be something of a hole-and-corner marriage. There might be reasons later,—still his pulses were cold,—which might make it imperative to bring his wife home to the shelter of her own roof. But not Giltraps,—oh no, not Giltraps. The little place was too thronged with dreams and visions of another woman. Somewhere, much nearer to London, they would find a place to settle down.

Father Darley met him at Victoria. The scheme for placing Avis under Lady Rodney's protection had fallen through, because Johnny Rodney, aged eleven, had carried home measles from his preparatory school, a sufficiently large supply to go round the family, wherefore her motherly and hospitable Ladyship was sequestered with her flock in

quarantine. He put a kind hand on Bretherton's shoulder. "My dear fellow!" he said, "I'd no idea it had cut you up so much."

"I *am* rather a scarecrow," Bretherton returned with a certain gloomy satisfaction. "I hope I shan't give Avis a fright, because—I am going to settle it up with her if she is willing. A special license will dispose of difficulties. Since Lady Rodney cannot have her she will be quite safe in Adams's charge. I propose to bring them back to town with me and establish them at a hotel. The gardener and his wife can see to Honeywells till we are ready to deal with the place."

"Ah well, I daresay the hasty marriage will be best, under the circumstances. I can't come down with you, I am sorry to say. Duty calls me elsewhere. I'll see Avis then—to-morrow, perhaps. Where will she be?"

Bretherton named a very discreet, very old-fashioned private hotel in Belgravia.

"Very well, then. You will be at the Langham. I can come round after breakfast—your breakfast—about ten o'clock. I will have to make arrangements for the marriage."

They parted on that. The priest went away saying to himself that he was glad things were settled and that Avis would be in the safe

keeping of a husband. He wished Bretherton had made a more cheerful groom. Again the misgiving came to his mind that there might be somebody else.

It was a July day. The trees had put on their summer splendour of darkness. The grey-green hay was lying in scented swathes in the fields as the train escaped from London and ran out into clean country. Fields and coppices and the heavy woods on the horizon lay in a brooding summer heat. The air scintillated with it. The faces of the other passengers in the railway carriage were white and languid. Not a breath of air came through the carriage-windows. Cattle standing knee-deep in a pond, swinging their tails to keep away the flies, were a grateful sight; so too were the glimpses of green gardens, full of July lilies, surrounding old red-brick houses, creeper-clad.

He was glad to escape from the train, to step out on the platform of the little country station, dominated by the beautiful calm presence of the hill which seemed to brood over the lovely villages and the quiet fields of sheep and cattle.

He had not written that he was coming. He would take Avis by surprise. He wondered if she would be startled by the suddenness of

the proposal. He said to himself that he might have been a married man of some weeks' standing by this time if Harry Sprague had not thought fit to shoot him.

The roads were white with dust where the sun fell on them through the haze of heat; where they ran under the trees they were deep tunnels of shade into which it was grateful to escape from the blinding glare outside. Reaching one of those oases of refreshment Bretherton passed a youth who nodded to him somewhat curtly. He had no memory of having seen him before. If he had, if the sun had not dazzled him, he might have wondered why the youth who was being coached by Mr. Daubeny should have coloured so hotly at seeing him.

It was good to turn off from the road into a field-path which ran a little way through a coppice before getting out into the open fields. The coppice, two fields and a short cut through the churchyard, brought one out in Woodhay village from which Honeywells was not far off.

He had crossed the coppice and was by the stile, just about to step over it, when he heard the sound of running feet and his name called behind him. He paused, turning about and waited, leaning one hand on the stile. As the youth came up he recognized him with a shock

of displeasure. It was the boy who had passed him by a while ago, the same who had been with Freddy Vernon that day at the railway station—the day when the scandal started. He shrewdly suspected Vernon of having had a hand in the scandal. He said to himself that if he was sure he would wring the fellow's neck. It was an unpleasant reminder to come face to face with the youth who had been Vernon's companion that day.

His expression as he turned about was one of haughty surprise; but the boy's face was disarming. Some fear, some shame, lay behind that face of a compelling candour. The singularly blue eyes which were the one positive beauty in Jim Douglas's plain, freckled face, looked at him with a shame-faced, conscience-stricken appeal in them. What the deuce did the young ass mean? In spite of himself Bretherton's forbidding expression softened as he met the lad's eyes. There was something so transparently honest about the irregular face, with its wide mouth, its freckles, its clean wholesomeness.

"You remember me, sir. We met one day at the railway station."

"I remember you quite well." He did not want to hear Freddy Vernon's name so much as mentioned. "You are——"

"Jim Douglas is my name, sir. I'm reading for the Army with Mr. Daubeny. I've something to tell you, sir. The only straight thing to do is to tell you." He was red as a beetroot now and yet behind the colour was an odd suggestion of pallor. The sweat stood out in great drops on his face. What could the young ass mean? He looked positively afraid, as though he might, if he had not held himself in check, show a clean pair of heels at any moment. Impossible! What was he thinking about? Bretherton had known Jim Douglas's type before. In all probability the lad was as brave as a bull-dog.

"I don't know how to begin, sir." He could have sworn the boy trembled. "I've done you a great wrong. It isn't our fault. We've been miserable over it. It all happened before we knew where we were. At least, it was my fault. She couldn't be in fault. She's an angel. Her poor little heart is breaking because of the wrong to you—after all you've done for her. I deserve the worst you can say to me."

He was bareheaded and as he concluded the flurried speech his head was bent as though he awaited sentence. He looked very young to Bretherton's mind. The hay-coloured hair if it had not been so tight-cropped would have curled; the sunburnt young neck and face;

Bretherton knew the type and knew that it was one to be trusted by man or woman.

A light was breaking over his mind. At first he had been simply bewildered. Now he began to see his way. It was Avis, of course! Like had found like; youth had flown to youth; and his grey hairs were free to go where they would.

He looked either way. Not a soul was in sight across the field-path or in the coppice. His eyes came back at the young unhappy face.

"This place is as good as anywhere else," he said. "Out with it. Make a clean breast of it or I shall never forgive you."

He sat down on the stile as though he foresaw that it was going to be a long business. The boy stood before him, a culprit, yet with a certain reassurance in his honest face which revealed everything.

"If we could only think it wouldn't be a blow to you, sir, Avis was persuaded—against her better judgment. That woman Adams—I don't like her much, but she adores Avis—she told the poor girl that you loved her, that it was her plain duty to marry you. I don't know why she did it. Perhaps it was the talk." He turned very red but his head went up and he squared his shoulders. "Of course there was talk. People are beasts. One man I

heard it from went away with a bloody mouth. Old Daubeny was frightened. He gave the fellow a pound to settle it. It was all right. I didn't want Avis's name to come into it. Then—no sooner was it all arranged with you than Adams turned about. Avis says she's got a bee in her bonnet that Father Darley wants to make a nun of her. The proposal that Avis should go to Lady Rodney fairly maddened her. She believed Avis would be spirited away to a convent against her will. She . . . I think she knew even then that we were in love with each other. She . . . helped . . . she brought us together. Avis has leant on her since her mother's death. It . . . it opened my eyes . . . when Avis told me she'd suggested that we should make a runaway of it. God knows—I was ready enough to do it in a way . . . it isn't the kind of thing . . . a man in love refuses. But . . . I knew how good you'd been to her. I said . . . we'd run straight; own up. You wouldn't want to marry her against her will."

"My dear young friend." Bretherton's tones were sarcastic but kindly. "No man wants to be married against a girl's will. I am glad you thought it well to own up. And now—as Miss Bourne's guardian, may I ask you what prospects you have of supporting a wife?"

"Not very much, sir, I'm afraid. Poor Avis, she'll be so happy that you take it like this. She has been heartbroken about you; and yet . . . and yet . . . she had an idea, sir, that Adams was wrong— she said there was something not quite . . . well . . . lover-like about you when you proposed to her. She said . . ."

"Never mind what she said. You can't expect a man of my age to behave like a boy of yours."

"No one would call you old," said the boy, with a concession in his voice which made Bretherton smile a little grimly to himself.

"You can't expect"—Bretherton wore his most legal aspect and was thoroughly enjoying himself. He liked bullying the boy— "that I'm going to leave Miss Bourne here for you to make love to, spoiling your own prospects as well. I'd like to know how much reading you've done these last three months."

"Not much, sir."

"I'm going to take her away to my cousin's widow in Worcestershire. Adams—I suppose we must make room for Adams—can follow at her leisure. Mr. Daubeny once kindly invited me to stay at the Vicarage for a night." He could think of the occasion now without his withers being wrung. "Do you think he would take me in for to-night? I propose to

take Miss Bourne down to Worcestershire to-morrow."

"He is the soul of hospitality. I know he would be glad."

"There are things I want to talk to him about—about you, my friend, for instance. There must be no more hole-and-corner wooing. No more wasting of time. When you want to see Avis I'll put you up—all being satisfactory. Five years hence we may think of marriage. Now, good-bye. I'm going to see Avis. I'll walk over to the Vicarage later. You'll prepare the way for me?"

The boy caught at his hand and wrung it.

"You heap coals of fire on my head, Mr. Bretherton," he said. "If I could only feel you didn't mind——"

"You ask too much, young man," Bretherton said, his heart feeling as though the weight of the world had been lifted from it, his pulses leaping, his whole world suddenly golden and rosy. How was he going to wait till to-morrow to see Lizzie? "You ask too much. Is Avis a girl to be relinquished lightly?"

Then, at the guilty look on the youth's face, he was suddenly contrite.

"Never mind, my lad," he said. "I am glad she has chosen so wisely after all. And I

daresay—if it comforts you to know it, my heart is not broken."

He thought afterwards that it was as well he had been moved to that honesty. What would the lad have thought of him in the days to come?

CHAPTER XXV

Avis was wont to say afterwards, twitting her young husband, that there had been just one little time in her life when she had been half-tempted to regret her choice between Bretherton and him. That was during the journey between Woodhay and Nunsholme, when Bretherton overwhelmed her with a serious and tender kindness, which was half contrition because of his leaping pulses and joyful heart. Even on her wedding journey she could scarcely receive a more assiduous kindness. They had had it out, she and Bretherton. She had sobbed her contrition, mopping away the rivulet of tears that would not be stayed, because Fate had ordained that she must love Jim Douglas and not him who was her benefactor, who had deserved all she could give him; and he had stood by feeling an intolerable hypocrite, while he tried to soothe her with tender words and phrases.

In the end he had concluded that to be honest was best. He remembered that he was taking Avis to the woman he adored. It was

not likely that his adoration would not be patent to the girl's eyes. He had indeed no idea of holding it in check. He was eager to show it to all the world.

So at last he had taken Avis's face by the chin, tilting it a little so as to look into her eyes, while she tried vainly to escape from him.

"Little Avis," he said, "do you think there are no cakes and ale left in the world for anyone because you must have your share?"

The tears stopped and her eyes became inquiring.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked in wonder.

He had no intention of telling her the whole truth which must be for ever concealed from her.

"Supposing, Avis," he said, "supposing that Mrs. Adams in her kindness had told each of us a pretty similar story?"

"*Oh!*" It was a long "Oh!" as though the revelation of his meaning came to her slowly. "You mean——?"

He stooped and laid a light affectionate kiss on her satin-smooth cheek of youth.

"I don't know why I should have believed it," he said, "that your golden youth should care for my grey hairs."

"Oh! Adams told you that! And she told me that you were dreadfully in love with me and that I owed so much to you that I must make you happy. What on earth put such things into her head? And she told you that I was in love with you and that you must marry me or I should die. What an old goose! And what a mess we might have made of it through listening to her! But," her face took a musing look, "I can't understand Adams, for lately it has all been Jim with her. I thought it was because she found out I cared for him."

"And were breaking your heart at the prospect of marrying me?"

"Oh not *that!*" said Avis in a shocked voice, her cheeks deepening their roses. "Not *that.* But Adams was very strange. She even suggested our going back to London quietly: that Jim should come up afterwards and we could be married. I was frightened of that, although I might have done it if Jim had asked me. But he didn't. He said we must run straight. I knew how right he was. Even Jim couldn't have made up for my treating you like a pig."

"Ah, I am glad Jim said you must run straight. He would, with that face, wouldn't he?" They passed easily from Mrs. Adams's

motives. Doubtless she had worked in her ignorant and tortuous way for what she believed to be her young mistress's happiness.

"I am glad you are not going to be unhappy Even Jim would not make up to me for that."

Upon the word he confessed.

"I hope I am going to be exquisitely happy, Avis," he said; and his face was like the face of a boy, not a bit legal now, but flushed with happiness, eager with anticipation.

"Oh! There is some one else. What a vain little fool I was to think you cared."

"I must have cared, Avis, if I had not been pre-occupied," he said; and kissed her hand.

They walked over from Nunsholme to Littlecombe, arriving about half-past four of the afternoon. It was a check to be told that Mrs. Harding had just gone out. His falling face moved Bastable to further information.

"She's gone towards the dairy, sir, with old Bruce. If you was to follow her across the park and through the spinney you might come up with her. If not you'll find her at the dairy; you can't miss her."

"You'll take care of this young lady and give her some tea."

Bastable had sent Avis many curious glances.

"I'll ask cook to send up a good tea for the

young lady, sir. You've come a journey, haven't you, sir?"

He went off, leaving Avis in Bastable's care, going out by the French windows of the drawing-room, across the lawn, down the terraces, walking discreetly while he was in sight of the windows, running like a happy boy when no eyes were upon him. If some of his acquaintances and friends in London could have seen him as he ran! And his face, that had shed the last vestige of its responsible early middle-age and was the face of a young lover! What boy's passion could be like his? his one passion,—for his heart had been singularly untouched and he had a clean record to carry to the one woman.

In the clearing of the coppice he found her sitting on the very self-same tree on which they had sat last February and again in May. He came lightly over the springing turf. She did not hear him. She was sitting in an attitude which carried to his mind a suggestion of forlornness, her elbows resting on her knees, her cheeks propped in her hands. The old dog lay watching her unhappily till he was aware of Bretherton's presence, when he came to him with a wagging tail. Her eyes looked straight before her at the dark screen of leaves in front. She had not noticed the dog's greeting of him.

He stood to watch her. The ground was carpeted with wild thyme. He recognized its sharp sweetness as he trod it underfoot.

Suddenly she turned about and saw him. For the suddenness the colour suffused her face. The grave tenderness of her expression was broken up, merged, transmuted into a wild joy.

"You!" she said. "I thought you were not coming back."

He knelt down beside her; and again the pungent sweetness of wild thyme was in his nostrils.

"Lizzie," he said, "I have brought Avis Bourne to you. I have left her at Littlecombe while I came on here. I want you to give her shelter and protection,—a motherless girl,—till —she has another protector."

Her face changed. Her eyes did not fall before his.

"Miss Bourne will be very welcome, Ralph," she said. "I am very glad you have brought her to me. I am sorry I was out when yon came."

"And I am glad you were out," he said, his passion rising, "for I wanted to have you to myself."

He watched her face for a second, holding himself in check. He had a certain cruel pleasure in seeing how she suffered for him.

Her lips had fallen into their old lines of a patient endurance, but her eyes smiled at him bravely.

"You may trust her with me, indeed, Ralph," she said. "It is right that she should be married from Littlecombe Hall. Edward would be pleased if he could know. Is she very pretty, Ralph?"

The woman's question on the lips of the simple and noble creature touched and delighted him.

"I think her very pretty," he said. "You will judge for yourself."

"And loving,—Ralph? I've often wanted a young thing to love me."

He was tempted to play with her a little longer, to hear the sadness in her voice and to see the shadow in her eyes, knowing that any second he, her lover, could chase them away and bring a happy confusion in their stead.

"You shall ask Mr. Jim Douglas," he said. "I've no doubt he finds Avis very loving. He is the youth of her choice."

"But——!"

"I heartily endorse her choice. We shall hurry on their happiness, you and I, having secured our own. Oh, Lizzie, my one woman, that child didn't want me nor I her. I have

come to my mate, the woman God made for me."

As he flung his arms about her and buried his face in her breast he was aware of the crushed sweetness of wild thyme and knew that there was a spray of it in her bosom. Her arms were about his neck and her cheek on his hair, since for the first time the woman in her was come awake and she had the gipsy way of love.

THE END

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